

The Feast of the Transfiguration is August 6th. First celebrated in the East in the late fourth century, it was not celebrated in the West until the ninth century, and then only in monastic liturgies. In 1457, the feast was declared a universal feast of the Church by Pope Calistus III. In Anglican liturgical practice the feast was not in the first Prayer Book of 1549, but was restored in 1561 as a black letter day. In the American revision of 1892 the feast was elevated to a red letter day with proper readings and collect. It has since been restored in other liturgies in the Anglican Communion.

There are several opinions as to the origin of the story of the transfiguration. Some scholars believe that the story is a resurrection or ascension story that has been inserted at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as a prefiguring of the glory that will follow his crucifixion. Others believe that the story may have concluded a collection of stories that tell of Jesus' working many owners and portraying Jesus as the new Moses.

Whatever the origin of the story, it is clear that Luke the Evangelist links the transfiguration with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. At both occasions a loud voice acclaims Jesus: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). At the beginning of his public ministry and at the end, the reader is reminded that this is not just an itinerant teacher, but the Son of the Mighty One who has come to judge the world and all the peoples in it.

In a sermon on the Feast of the Transfiguration, Leo the Great wrote the following about the meaning of this feast for the Christian:

The great reason for this transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of his disciples, and to prevent the humiliation of his voluntary suffering from disturbing the faith of those who had witnessed the surpassing glory that lay concealed.

With no less forethought he was also providing a firm foundation for the hope of holy Church. The whole body of Christ was to understand the kind of transformation it would receive as a gift. The members of that body were to look forward to a share in that glory which first blazed out in Christ their head. (The Prayer Book Office, p. 754)

The transfiguration of Jesus is to strengthen the disciples on the road to Jerusalem, whether those disciples are those on the mountain or those who are on the road to Jerusalem in their earthly pilgrimage here and now. Even in the face of mocking, scourging and death, the

Lord reveals the glory that is to be his and the glory that the faithful will share with him.

In this sense, the transfiguration serves as a parenthesis, a story told to encourage the faithful in times of persecution and distress. Its relation to the baptism of Jesus (in Luke's account) reminds Christians that, just as they have joined Christ in baptism, so they, after many trials and tests, will join with him in glory. It is in this tone that the Collect for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany speaks of the transfiguration: "Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory."

For those engaged in ministry in a world that is frequently trying and difficult, the transfiguration should come as a breath of fresh air. It is a reminder that our work is not in vain and that the ultimate victory, which is Christ's, is one that we will share after running the course set before us.

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