

August 19, 2007

The Sunday after our Lady's Dormition

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In addition to the three Synoptic Gospels, the event of our Lord's Transfiguration is also described in the Second Epistle of Peter (1: 13-21). This latter tells the story with less detail but certainly with no less interest.

St. Peter's second epistle was written shortly before his martyrdom, traditionally dated during the persecution that followed Nero's fire at Rome in the summer of A.D. 64. After the blame for that fire was shifted onto the Christians of the city, the imperial police, along with their obvious leader, Peter, the chief of the apostles. He evidently wrote this letter while waiting to die.

Hence, Peter's mind was much taken up with his impending execution. He wrote, "Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my *exodos*."

Two words in this account seem especially pertinent to our theme. First, Peter refers to his impending death as his *exodus*. This is the very word Luke uses to speak of the conversation of Jesus with Moses and Elijah: "And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His *exodos* which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9: 30-31). These are the only two occasions in the New Testament where *exodus* is used with reference to death.

Second, Peter speaks of his death in terms of putting off his "tent." Perhaps the associations attached to this metaphor provided the occasion for him immediately to speak of the Transfiguration; we recall from all three Synoptic Gospels that Peter had spoken enigmatically of "tents" on that occasion.

In any case, the Apostle immediately goes on to describe that event: "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known

to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain."

There are several particulars to note about Peter's description of the Transfiguration. First, the lack of detail is clearly to be explained by the Apostle's presumption that the event was already well known to his readers. He was not obliged to elaborate on the details, beyond reminding his readers that he had been a witness to the event.

Second, his quality as a witness to the vision of glory and the Father's voice established Peter's authority to refute the "cunningly devised fables" that are the object of his concern throughout much of this epistle (2:1-22; 3:3,17).

Third, the Lord's Transfiguration confirmed the hopes of the ancient prophets, who desired to see what the apostles saw. Thus Peter goes on to write, "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (1:19). The fulfillment of biblical prophecy in Christ is a preoccupation of St. Peter (1 Peter 1:10; 2 Peter 3:2).

Fourth, the "cunningly devised fables," concerning which Peter is so alarmed, have to do chiefly with the misinterpretation of prophecy. Thus, in this context of the Transfiguration he goes on to insist "that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2:20-21).

That is to say, for Peter the Transfiguration was weighted with an exegetical significance, such as we have already seen in Luke's account of it. The glory of the Transfiguration casts a confirming radiation on biblical prophecy. The true meaning of the latter comes to light in the Transfiguration, where the apostles "have the prophetic word confirmed." All other exegesis consists in "cunningly devised fables." The glory of the transfigured Christ is the light of the

Scriptures themselves, to which Christians "do well to attend." This is their source of illumination "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The Bible's ultimate fulfillment comes in history's final revelation of the transfigured Lord, "the bright morning star" (Revelation 22: 16; cf. 2:28).

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