

August 26, 2007

## The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It has sometimes caused surprise that St. John, though a witness to the Lord's Transfiguration, does not narrate that scene, as did Matthew, Mark, and Luke. More than one student of his gospel, however, has explained the absence of the Transfiguration in John by remarking that Jesus is *always* transfigured in what John wrote.

There is much merit in this remark. If the Transfiguration is the manifestation of the glory of God in Christ, who spoke more often on this theme than John? This apostle, who saw the transfigured Lord and heard the Father's voice claiming Him as His Son, is the very one that wrote, "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (1:14).

The Jesus presented in John's Gospel appears as the eternal Word, in whom "was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4). Becoming flesh and dwelling among us (1:14), He is the living revelation of God's glory on this earth. Even though "no one has seen God at any time," John says, "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (1:18).

The divine glory manifest in Christ is not only a theme in John's gospel; it also serves as a structural component of the narrative. John records exactly seven miracles of Jesus, which he calls "signs." Seven--the mystic number of these signs--symbolizes the fullness of the revelation of the divine glory.

Leading in each case to the commitment of faith, these signs do not reveal the divine glory as *static*, so to speak, but as *active*. *Who* Jesus is, is revealed in *what* Jesus does. Each of these signs is *enacted*; it has motion.

The signs commence with the transformation of the water into wine at the wedding feast, concerning which John tells us, "This beginning (*arche*), of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and *manifested His glory*; and His disciples believed in Him" (2:11, emphasis added).

John's second sign enacted by Jesus is the curing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54); as in the case of the miracle of Cana, the man himself "believed, and his whole household" (4:53). Next comes the restoration of the paralytic at the pool (5:1-15), followed by the miracle of the bread (6:1-14), the walking on the water (6:15-21), and the healing of the man born blind (9:1-41). The final sign in John is the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44). It was of this culminating sign that Jesus told Martha, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would *see the glory of God?*" (11:40, emphasis added).

These Johannine signs are also accompanied by theological comments on their significance, either in the detailed conversations of the narrative itself (as in the raising of Lazarus and the healing of the blind man) or by the Lord's own subsequent elaboration (as in the Bread of Life discourse).

Thus, each of these events is a transfiguration, a revelation of God's glory in the activity of Jesus. In His life and ministry each sign becomes a window through which believers contemplate the divine glory, and Jesus is transfigured with light through John's whole narrative.

In the midst of these seven signs, moreover, John inserts two lengthy conversations, one with Nicodemus (3:1-21) and the other with the Samaritan woman (4:5-42). These pursue the same theme of revelation that John elaborates in the stories of the signs.

At the end of the seven signs, John summarizes the tragedy of the unbelief with which the enemies of Jesus responded to His revelation (12:37-41). This summary appeals to the prophet Isaiah, who had foretold the hardness of heart of those who refused to believe. According to John, "These things Isaiah said when he *saw His glory* and spoke of Him" (12:41, emphasis added). This transfigured Christ, that is to say, was already contained in the Old Testament Scriptures. Christ, as gloriously revealed in these signs, was the object of prophetic vision. Even Moses had spoken of Him (1:45; 5:46). For John, then, as for Luke, Peter, and Paul, the revelation of the divine glory in Christ is the key to the understanding of biblical prophecy.

The final unbelief leads directly to the Lord's Passion, which is introduced by the great Last Supper discourse, which speaks also of the divine glory of Christ (13: 31,32; 14: 13; 17: 5,22,24). In every scene of this gospel, then, from the Lord's appearance at John's baptismal site all the way through the Lord's death and Resurrection (7: 39; 12: 16,23,28), the divine light appears among men. John records all these things that we readers too may "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20: 31).

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