

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Transfiguration of the Lord

Year A

6 August 2023



Collect

O God, who in the glorious Transfiguration
of your Only Begotten Son
confirmed the mysteries of faith by the witness of the Fathers
and wonderfully prefigured our full adoption to sonship,
grant, we pray, to your servants,
that, listening to the voice of your beloved Son,
we may merit to become coheirs with him.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The Feast of the Transfiguration was established on August 6 in the Western Church by papal decree in 1457 in commemoration of the Hungarian forces' defeat of the Ottoman Turks the year before. It's ironic that a military victory should have prompted the observance of such a profoundly spiritual event in the life of Jesus. Another papal decree – that of John Paul II in 2002 – included the transfiguration among five “luminous mysteries” he added to the Rosary. Here's what he wrote:

“The Gospel scene of Christ's transfiguration, in which the three Apostles Peter, James and John appear entranced by the beauty of the Redeemer, can be seen as an icon of Christian contemplation. To look upon the face of Christ, to recognise its mystery amid the daily events and the sufferings of his human life, and then to grasp the divine splendour definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father: this is the task of every follower of Christ and therefore the task of each one of us. In contemplating Christ's face, we become open to receiving the mystery of Trinitarian life, experiencing ever anew the love of the Father and delighting in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul's words can then be applied to us: ‘Beholding the glory of the Lord, we are being changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (2 Cor 3:18).”

A reading from the book of Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

As I watched:

Thrones were set in place
and one of great age took his seat.
His robe was white as snow,
the hair of his head as pure as wool.
His throne was a blaze of flames,
its wheels were a burning fire.
A stream of fire poured out,
issuing from his presence.
A thousand thousand waited on him,
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
A court was held and the books were opened.
I gazed into the visions of the night.
And I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven,
one like a son of man.
He came to the one of great age
and was led into his presence.
On him was conferred sovereignty,
glory and kingship,
and men of all peoples, nations and languages
became his servants.
His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty
which shall never pass away,
nor will his empire ever be destroyed.

First Reading

The book of Daniel is placed in the Bible with the writings of the prophets, but is distinguished by its late composition and the nature of its contents. Although it presents Daniel as an exile in Babylon, the work was compiled centuries later, when the Jewish people were being persecuted by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes. This threat to their survival was countered by apocalyptic literature – writing characterised by cosmic visions and revelations promising ultimate victory over the powers of evil.

Today's reading comes from a section in the book where Daniel has a dream in which a succession of kingdoms appears. The first four are represented by earthly monsters, but the fifth, as we hear, features a figure that is both human and heavenly. Drawing on imagery from the psalms and especially the prophet Ezekiel, "one like a son of man" appears before the heavenly court and is granted eternal dominion over the entire world. Just as various sources have contributed to this depiction, so in turn Daniel's vision is cited several times in the New Testament apocalypse, the book of Revelation. It also contributes directly to the story of Jesus' transfiguration.

Readers have the rewarding task of enabling the assembly to imagine the heavenly scene. As they deliver Daniel's vivid description in words, they are painting a radiant portrait in the minds of their listeners. The vision may be over two thousand years old, but it retains its power to encourage and inspire believers in every crisis situation.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 96:1-2, 5-6, 9

R. The Lord is king, the most high over all the earth.

The Lord is king, let earth rejoice,
let all the coastlands be glad.
Cloud and darkness are his raiment;
his throne, justice and right. **R.**

The mountains melt like wax
before the Lord of all the earth.
The skies proclaim his justice;
all peoples see he glory. **R.**

For you indeed are the Lord
most high above all the earth
exalted far above all spirits. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Daniel's vision of a universal sovereign is fully in harmony with the tradition of the psalms, especially those that acclaim the kingship of God and those whom God has anointed to rule. Psalm 96/97 is one of these. It extols Israel's God not only in terms of nature – earth, cloud, darkness, coastlands, mountains, skies – but also in terms of justice and right. Under God all is in proper order.

The response is a composite of phrases from the first and third stanzas of the responsorial psalm. Altogether the psalm is a work of religious imagination, cast in poetry. It calls us out of our scientific mindsets into the realm of creative insight and contemplation. It invites awe and wonder at the created world and delight in its Creator.

The language of this psalm is clearly poetic and should be respected as such. Readers will also take care to cue the assembly at the end of the shorter third stanza.

A reading from the second letter of St Peter

1:16-19

It was not any cleverly invented myths that we were repeating when we brought you the knowledge of the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; we had seen his majesty for ourselves. He was honoured and glorified by God the Father, when the Sublime Glory itself spoke to him and said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour.' We heard this ourselves, spoken from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have confirmation of what was said in prophecies; and you will be right to depend on prophecy and take it as a lamp for lighting a way through the dark until the dawn comes and the morning star rises in your minds.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

17:1-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone. There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Lord,' he said 'it is wonderful for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow, and from the cloud there came a voice which said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.' When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear. But Jesus came up and touched them. 'Stand up,' he said 'do not be afraid.' And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but only Jesus.

As they came down from the mountain Jesus gave them this order, 'Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.'

Second Reading

The jury is out as to whether 2 Peter was the last work of the New Testament to be composed, but there's no doubt that it was the last to be included in the list or canon of inspired Christian writings. Contrary to contemporary concerns about authenticity and plagiarism, it was customary in the ancient world for works to be attributed to a revered figure of the past. In this case, 2 Peter purports to be the last testament of the apostle Peter, though it must have been written some decades after his death and in a polished style unlikely to be that of a Galilean fisherman.

To bolster his authority, the author claims to have been a witness to the transfiguration of Jesus. The brief description of the event is in accord with the gospel accounts of this unique event. More particularly, the author invokes this experience to rebut claims that his teaching about the final coming of Christ is just a "cleverly invented myth". He also wants to attest to the reliability of prophecy "as a lamp for lighting a way through the dark . . . until the morning star rises in your minds".

As it stands, this reading is an unqualified affirmation of Jesus as God's Beloved Son and an endorsement of the prophetic word of God. Proclaimed with clarity and conviction, it readies the worshipping community for the gospel account of the transfiguration.

Gospel

The story of the transfiguration is told every year on the second Sunday of Lent. The commentary for that day is reproduced here.

Matthew introduced Jesus as a new Moses at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Moses went up Mt Sinai to receive the Law, then came down from the heights to deliver it to the people. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes up a mountain (rather than a hill) to present his authoritative interpretation of the Law to the people. With the story of the transfiguration, Matthew makes the comparison more explicit. Aspects of the transfiguration such as the mountain, the voice from heaven, the cloud and a glorious appearance all feature in the stories of Moses in the book of Exodus (eg 34:29-35).

But the transfiguration reveals much more about Jesus' identity. He is the heavenly Son of Man who is prophesied in Daniel (7:13) and affirmed in the book of Revelation (1:13). He is re-affirmed as the Beloved Son of God, the title with which he was addressed at his baptism.

This episode is rich with other biblical allusions. In the Old Testament there's the mysterious figure of Elijah, the tent of meeting on the exodus journey, and the suffering servant. In the New there's the role of Peter, James and John in other events such as the agony in the garden. Jesus' rebuff of Peter's desire to stay on the mountain brings to mind the hymn from Philipians (2:6-11). Jesus did not cling to heavenly glory but accepted earthly death, even on the cross.

This marvellous and mysterious event deserves a faith-filled proclamation. Its blend of narrative, dialogue and action offers the minister of the word the opportunity to lead the assembly into the disciples' luminous experience.

Concluding Blessing

May the God of all consolation order our days in his peace
and grant us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May he free us always from every distress
and confirm our hearts in his love.

Amen.

So that on this life's journey
we may be effective in good works,
rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity,
and may come happily to eternal life.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time IV, Roman Missal p 716)