

Epiphany Last: Matthew 17:1-9: The Transfiguration

1. The last Sunday after Epiphany is always devoted to the Transfiguration of Jesus. It is recorded by all three Synoptics, referred to at Jn. 1:14, and very clearly stated at II Pet. 1:16-18. The Transfiguration is important just before Ash Wednesday because in the preceding chapter all Synoptics record Peter's confession of the Christ and Jesus' prediction of His impending suffering, death and resurrection. Stoeckhardt: "Both events, Peter's confession and the transfiguration of Christ are closely related because the miraculous occurrence on the mountain was proof that Christ was truly the Son of the Living God. There is also confirmed, through the transfiguration, Jesus' announcement of His coming suffering and death, and of His return to glory."
2. Vs. 1: μετὰ with acc. always means "after". ἡμέρας ἕξ: after what is recorded at Mt. 16:13-28, which ought be read at this point. παραλαμβάνει, a tender word used frequently by Matthew, "to take to one's self". Occurs six times in Mt. 1 and 2 with reference to Joseph taking Mary or the Child. Peter, James and John, cf. Mk. 5:37; our text; and, Mt. 26:37. They were witnesses on these three important occasions. Peter confirms one occasion at II Pet. 1:16-18. Furthermore, though Peter had confessed Christ (16:16) and had been commended by Christ (16:17) he became the devil's agent in being a σκάνδαλον (trap) to Christ (16:23). He needed further instruction and strengthening. ἀναφέρει "He carries up" not literally, of course. It reminds one of the Southern idiom preserved in the Negro Spiritual: "Carry me back to Old Virginy." There "carry" means "take". ὄρος ἤψηλον: Tabor is ruled out by all commentators. Hermon is espoused by some. Lenski: "one of the high ridges in the mountainous region not far from Caesarea Philippi". Hendriksen: "Jebel Jermak in Upper Galilee, the highest elevation in that entire region." We simply don't know. Bengel aptly remarks: "The name of the mountain is not mentioned, and thereby superstition is prevented." Human beings easily become idolatrous, venerating places instead of the Lord Jesus. Think of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or the Church of the Sepulchre in Jerusalem. People come in droves to these places on Christmas and Good Friday but no one even knows for sure that the sites are exact. κατ' ἴδαν ATT: "to be alone with them"; JB: "where they could be alone". In addition to the reasons given above, perhaps we might add that Jesus longed for the company of these three men. He was truly human (and still is).
3. Vs. 2: Most translations stick to "transfigured", the Latin equivalent to μεταμορφώθη. LB has "his appearance changed". TEV, "a change came over him". ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν "in their presence". They saw what happened. The second καὶ is exegetical, explaining the passive verb or resultative. Jesus knew what was going to happen, but it was done to Him by the Father. It reminds one of Lk. 10:22. That only the human nature of Christ was transfigured and transfused visibly with divinity is clear from the nouns "face" and "clothing". His face flashed as the sun (flashes). His clothing became white as the light (shines). It must have been a brilliant sight. Peter had made a brilliant confession of the Christ, the Son of the Living God (16:16). This is now confirmed by what they saw. Jesus proved His divinity by Word and deed and now confirms it by sight for the disciples. His entire body and human nature were suffused visibly so that even His clothing was affected. Cf. Rev. 1:13-16. Someday we shall see Him as He is now, and as He must have appeared, at least in a measure, in Mt. 17:2. At this point compare Lenski and Hendriksen. The latter rejects this sentence in Lenski: "The whole body of Jesus for a brief time was allowed to shine with the light and refulgence of its heavenly dignity." Reformed theology is bankrupt when it comes to the person of Christ. It is hard to understand how Hendriksen understands these words. He is completely oblivious to the word "majesty" in II Pet. 1:16.
4. Vs. 3: ἰδοὺ, LB and JB "suddenly". Perhaps. At any rate it introduces something most remarkable,

a miracle. For saints to return in visible form is out of the ordinary. ὤφθη αὐτοῖς "there was seen by them." The verb ὤφθη is used of the appearance of angels (Lk. 1:11), God (Acts 7:2) and of Jesus (Acts 9:17), an actual appearance, not an apparition. Bengel says (in ftnt.): "As Moses stands at the beginning of the law at its representative, so Elias at the beginning of the prophets, and the Lord Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel, at once its representative and embodiment." In the text he adds: "They bear witness to the true Messiah, and to Him only." Fahling: "They had been zealous for the Lord and His Law, one as the lawgiver, the other as a fiery reformer; but neither of them had been able to stop the transgression." Bengel again: "Christ, not Moses, is the ἀπαρχή, the first-fruits. The resuscitation of Moses does not confer life upon others; that of Christ does." From Luke's account we know what the topic of conversation was. Stoeckhardt says: "To His departure, which Jesus was to fulfill in Jerusalem, which was told Him by the two citizens of heaven upon the command of God, belonged also the last departure of His agonizing death, that Jesus should enter into His glory through suffering." For the most part, Moses, Elijah and Jesus were rejected by their own people. But the Father strengthened His Son through the transfiguration, a foretaste of eternal glory, and the conversation of two mighty prophets. They were in glory. But He alone, on this occasion, was glorified already in this life.

5. Vs. 4: ἀποκριθεῖς simply means "in response", whether a situation (as here) or to what was said. Here Peter is not responding to what Moses and Elijah said. Commentators debate the question whether the three disciples understood the conversation of the other three. Some say yes, some no. We don't know. AV, NKJV, NIV, NASB, AAT and JB translate "for us to be here" whereas RSV, TEV and NEB have "that we are here". Curiously, Luther translates: "Herr, hie ist gut sein"="Lord, it is good to be here" thus avoiding the problem. By the way, this is reflected in TLH #135, stanzas 1, 2, and 5. Ylvisaker has this in a ftnt.: "We read ἡμῶς not ἡμῖν. If it had been Peter's intention to say that it was good for himself and for the other καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμῖν. It is fortunate, he says, that we, Thy disciples, are present." εἰ θέλεις The language of faith and obedience. ποιήσω "I will make." AV and NKJV read "let us make" because of the text of the Majority (M). Three datives of advantage follow. Nothing is said of tents for Peter, James and John. But neither does it matter, for Lk. 9:33 informs us that Peter did not know what he was saying. What was good about being there? It must have been a remarkable experience. And the suggestion about the three tents likely means that Peter wanted this to continue. Furthermore, the announcement of Jesus' death (16:21) must have staggered them. Perhaps Peter thought it would be better to stay there than to face Jesus' prediction.

6. Vs. 5: So far as we know, Jesus did not respond to Peter's statement. But we do know that the situation interrupted what Peter was saying. The first three words of this vs. are a genitive absolute. The word ἔτι clearly indicates that Peter was interrupted. Note λαλέω again (cf. vs. 3), denoting informal, familiar speech. JB, NEB and AAT render ἴδοθ' "suddenly". Note that there are two ἴδοθ' in this vs., indicating remarkable things. Both bright cloud and voice are heaven-sent. Bengel remarks: "Matters of great moment, one of the greatest revelation." What is the antecedent of αὐτοῦς? Bengel "the disciples". Lenski "all who were present". We leave it unanswered. Very plainly the disciples heard what the Father said. Bengel says: "A voice came from heaven, first Mt. 3:17; secondly, on this occasion; thirdly, and lastly, a little before our Lord's Passion, Jn. 12:28. This speech has three divisions which regard the Psalms, the Prophets, and Moses." Then, in a ftnt. he explains: "Ps. 2:7: Thou art My Son; Is. 42:1: In Whom My Soul delighteth; Deut. 18:15: Unto Him ye shall harken." Well said. Note the doubling of the article ὁ with the passive adjective ἀγοπητῶς, making it emphatic. The Father is approving totally of the person and work of the incarnate Christ. All three Synoptics have ἀκοῦετε αὐτοῦ "keep on hearing Him." RSV, TEV, NIV, JB, NEB and AAT have "Listen to him." We think AV and NKJV are better "Hear Him", but perhaps the difference is not that great. LB is to be rejected: "Obey him." It's more than that. Because of

their false Messianic notions and weakness the disciples needed to hear this. And they did hear Jesus. Read II Pet. 1:16-19 again. Stoeckhardt remarks: "We too are directed to the voice of Christ, to Christ's Word, which is God's Word, and not to wonderful visions. We have enough in His Word. That is a bright light, which gives light to us in this dark world, and shows us the way of salvation, and it will shine until the dawn of the bright day, and Christ, the Morning Star arises, and we then see the Light in His Light."

7. Vs. 6: Ylvisaker: "If the sight of Moses and Elijah had made them 'sore afraid' they were even more distressed by the spoken word. In their terror, they throw themselves upon the ground, realizing that they stand face to face with the holiness of God." Only Matthew reports this prostration on the ground. Hendriksen says: "In the presence of that which is holy and filled with majesty, sinful men become frightened (Gen. 3:10; Jdg. 6:22; 13:22; Is. 6:5; Dan. 8:17; 10:9; Hab. 3:16; Rev. 1:17a)."
8. Vs. 7: Only Matthew reports that He approached them, not vice versa. And thus it always is. Because of our sins and sinfulness we are afraid to approach Him. But He mercifully comes to us. Furthermore, He touched them. Like a parent touching a frightened child. They lay prostrate because they were afraid. He counters with a command to get up. And how often does not Jesus say: μή φοβεῖσθε! He is the only One Who can truly say this because He alone can and does dispel fear. Hendriksen: "The words 'Be not afraid' in one form or another are found throughout Scripture. . . . When they are uttered by him who is able and eager to supply whatever is needed in any circumstance of life they really help." Bengel: "They were prostrated by what they saw and heard; they were raised again by His familiar and efficacious touch." Even Christians are frightened by what they see and hear. The preacher must use the Gospel to raise them up and drive away their fears.
9. Vs. 8: At the bidding of Jesus they got up, with fears dispelled. Quite naturally they looked about them, likely expecting to see something of which they had seen before. That only Jesus remained and that they saw only Him is stressed by all three Gospels. That is precisely what Jesus willed. Bengel remarks: "'Jesus alone' hence it is evident that He is the Son, who is to be heard, not Moses, nor Elias." First there was ecstasy over the sight. Then there was terror. But, finally, they heard and saw Jesus alone. A whole sermon could be preached on this verse. Sinful, human beings are fickle. Ecstatic one moment, fearful the next. Subjective feelings are deceptive. Christ and His Word give us "a steady new spirit" and "strengthen us with a willing spirit" (Ps. 51:10.12 AAT). That is true faith. Cf. Gal. 2:20.
10. Vs. 9: The first six words in the Greek text comprise a genitive absolute. Both Matthew and Mark record this command of Jesus. λέγων is like our English "as follow". Note the prominent position of Μηδενι. This includes the other nine disciples. The word δραμα is found only here in the Gospels, but eleven times in Acts. In each case it means "that which is seen, a sight divinely granted." It really happened. They truly saw it. Some commentators think that the other disciples were not yet prepared for such a vision or might become jealous of the three if they learned about it. That cannot be proved. Hendriksen remarks: "Every danger of a premature public proclamation must be avoided. When the proper time arrives, that is, after the Son of man's resurrection, the story of the transfiguration can, will, and must be proclaimed. The very fact of the resurrection will shed the necessary light on it." And Lenski: "Even the disciples (all of them) had wrong expectations concerning the Messiah. These wrong, fleshly expectations, if the news of the transfiguration had been spread abroad, would have been fanned into flames and would have caused a great deal of harm. . . . Jesus constantly avoided the use of the title 'Messiah' because it had become connected with fanciful and extravagant political ideas of earthly grandeur." And, quite obviously, the three did obey Jesus by telling no one. We stick to what Peter says at II Pet. 1:16: the three were eye-witnesses of His

majesty. That is why He took them along. And Jesus sealed the lips of these witnesses. Note that here Jesus calls Himself "the Son of man", the term always used when He referred to His suffering, death, and resurrection. ἐκ νεκρῶν in this form is used frequently in NT only of Christ or believers, never of the ungodly. This eliminates some of the faulty ideas of the millennialists. Note the variant reading for the passive ἐγερθῆ. The active form ἀνάστῃ is well attested. Both are used of the resurrection of Christ. He was raised but He also rose from the dead.

11. A final remark with reference to two words: The word ὄρος, vs. 1, draws this remark from Bengel: "Several very remarkable divine manifestations have been made on mountains. See Acts 7:30.38." And the word νεφέλη, vs. 5, draws this remark from Ylvisaker: "There came a cloud and overshadowed them as a token of God's presence (Ex. 13:21f; 16:10). Also on Mt. Sinai the Lord came in a similar way, but on that occasion it was in 'a thick cloud' (Ex. 19:9), as an indication of the sternness of God's authority and judgment; now He appears in 'a bright cloud' as a token of His gentleness, His amiable grace. Now the sweet melody of the Gospel shall be heard." But that does not mean that Ex. 24, or any other OT text, influenced the origin and development of the transfiguration, as higher critics sometimes maintain.