

## Preaching Christ Crucified at the Transfiguration

In the month of August, the Orthodox Christian Church worldwide celebrates the feast day of the Transfiguration. The event takes place when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up Mount Tabor and manifests himself to them with shining face and brilliant garments. This is no small matter. The event is foretold in the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> (Exodus 24:9-18, Exodus 34:29-35, Habakkuk 3:2), described in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-13, and Luke 9:28-36), and testified to by St. Peter himself (2 Peter 1:10-19). In the Transfiguration, we see a manifestation of the divinity of Christ.

We Orthodox Christians love this feastday! It's got everything that we love to "theologize" about – the uncreated light, the divine energies, theosis, the glorified and resurrected Christ, etc. However, we must also look deeper into the scenario for the message of the Cross. As Orthodox Christians, we must hold steadfastly to the Pauline statement that "...we preach Christ crucified..." (1 Cor. 1:23). Is the message of the Cross in the Transfiguration? Absolutely! Take an icon of the Transfiguration, an icon of the Crucifixion, and your Bible and learn to preach Christ crucified at the Transfiguration.

The central aspect of both icons (and the scriptural texts themselves) is Jesus. In the Transfiguration, we get a glimpse of Christ's glory. The Gospels state that the Lord's face was altered, shining like the sun, and that His clothes became brilliant white. In the crucifixion scene, we find quite the opposite. Jesus is stripped and beaten, a crown of thorns is placed on his head, they divided his garments, and cast lots for his tunic. We see not the glory of God as Peter, James, and John did on Mount Tabor, but in the extreme humility of our Savior.

Next, in both scenarios, two figures appear with Jesus. It is interesting that in Habakkuk 3:2, in the Prophet's Prayer, it states that the Lord "...shall be known between the two living creatures..." In the Transfiguration, those two creatures are Elijah and Moses. Two great prophets from the Old Testament bear witness to the Transfigured Christ. At Great Vespers for the feast we sing "[t]alking with Christ, Moses and Elijah showed that He is Lord of both the living and the dead, the God who spake of old through the Law and the Prophets." In the Crucifixion, the two living creatures on either side of

the Lord are two thieves that are crucified with Jesus. Moses and Elijah bear witness to Jesus Christ as the Messiah – the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets – while the two thieves in Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels mock and revile Him.

Another interesting aspect is the reaction of the Apostles. At the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John, despite the awesomeness of what was revealed to them, do not flee in terror, but rather remain with the Lord. At Great Vespers for the feast we sing that the Apostles were “...[s]eized with astonishment and wonder. They even state “Lord, it is good for us to be here...” (Matt. 17:4). Before the crucifixion, when Jesus is arrested, Matthew and Mark testify that the disciples forsook and fled; it apparently was not good to be there. All four Gospels also tell of Peter’s denial of Jesus. Only John, in his gospel, is reportedly at the cross when the Lord is crucified.

In both scenes there is mention of clouds/darkness and the presence of God. At the Transfiguration, all three synoptic Gospels report that a cloud overshadowed them (in Matthew it was a “bright cloud”) and they heard the voice of God the Father. This scenario parallels the Old Testament theophanies where God manifested himself in a cloud (Ex. 13:17-22; Exod 16:10; Lev. 16:2; 3 Kings 8:10 are a few of the many examples). It should also remind us of the Annunciation where the archangel Gabriel tells Mary that “...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you... (Luke 1:35). From that overshadowing bright cloud at the Transfiguration, the voice of the Father proclaimed, “This is My beloved Son...” At the Crucifixion we see quite the opposite. Instead of a bright cloud, the Gospels all report that from the third to the sixth hour, while Jesus was being crucified, there was darkness all over the land. No voice proclaimed, “This is My beloved Son.” Rather, Matthew and Mark both report that Jesus’s final words from the cross were, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

There is one last interesting detail. In our hymnography from Great Vespers for the Transfiguration, we sing that “[t]he angels ministered in fear and trembling, the heavens shook and the earth quaked, as they beheld on earth the Lord of glory.” No earthquake is mentioned in the Gospel narratives. However, Matthew’s gospel does testify to an earthquake at the Crucifixion. On Great and Holy Thursday, at the chanting of the beatitudes, we sing, “The whole creation, O Christ, beholding Thy Crucifixion,

trembled; the foundations of the earth were shaken for dread of your might; (...) the mountains quaked; and the rocks burst asunder....” An interesting parallel in our hymnography that has a purpose.

When comparing these details in the Transfiguration and the Crucifixion a series of opposites or antitheses becomes apparent. In these antitheses there is an important message. *The splendor and majesty of the Transfiguration of Christ - the uncreated light, the divine energies, the divinity of Christ, and the proclamation of the resurrect glory of Christ – is understood through the scandal and humiliation of the Cross.* To support this hypothesis, there is no better source than St. Paul who writes:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-11).

There is a message in all of this for us, too. As much as we Orthodox love to “theologize” about the doctrine of theosis, our own eventual glorification and deification in Christ, we must remember that it comes with a price – our own crucifixion. Once again, St. Paul says it best:

... do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (Romans 6:3-6).

Elsewhere the Apostle writes: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Thus, we can only see the glorified and Transfigured Christ through the lens of the Cross and we can only see ourselves transfigured and deified when we crucify ourselves to the world, pick up our crosses, and follow Jesus. In doing so, we can all look forward to the completion of our adoption as God's children (Galatians 3:26-28), our own personal Transfiguration by God's grace (2 Peter 1:4), and the voice of the Father from the bright cloud saying, "You are my beloved children in whom I am well pleased."

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references and quotations are from *The Orthodox Study Bible* (2008).