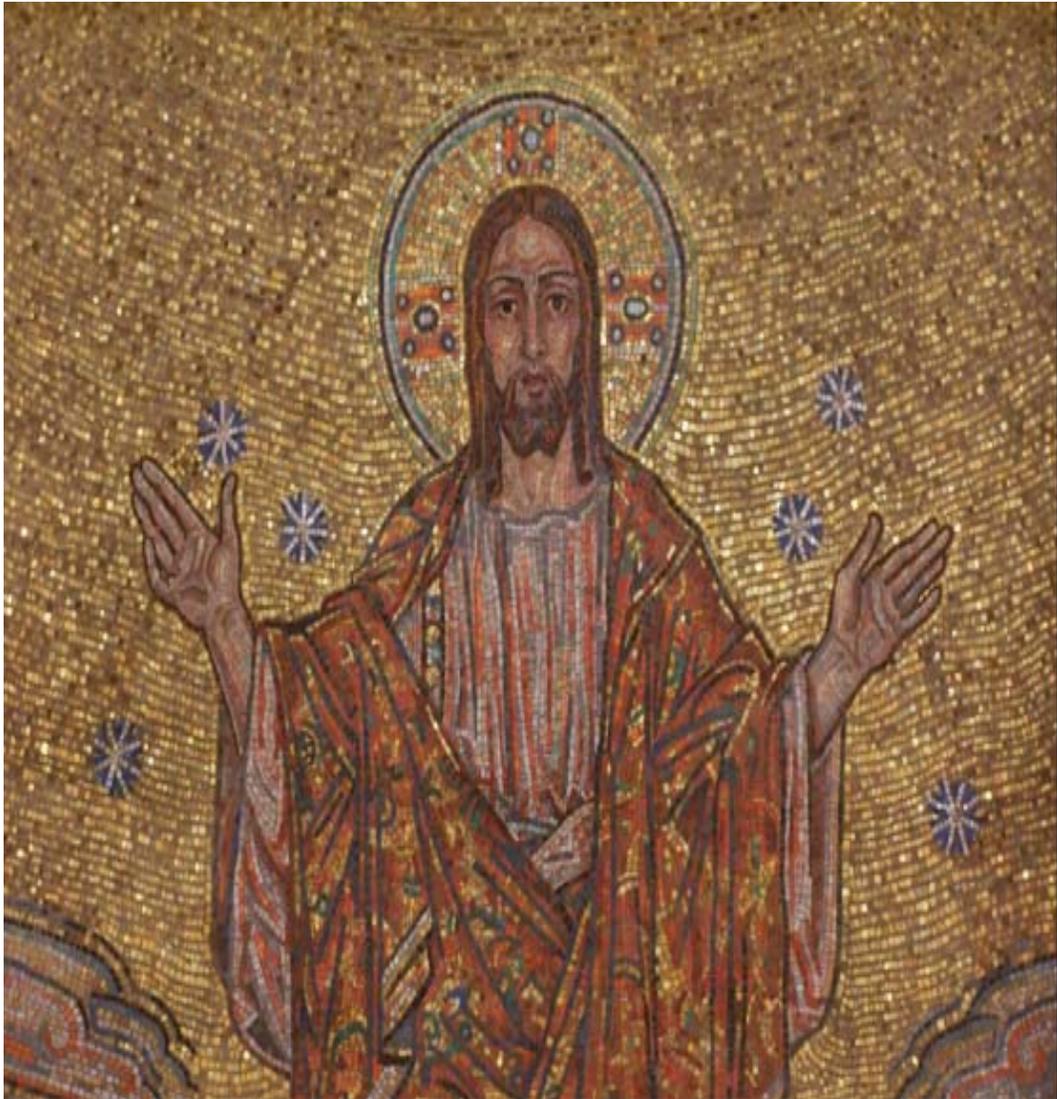


**BEHOLDING HIS GLORY**  
Transfiguration & Human Transformation



**Donald P. Richmond**

## INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that the Transfiguration of our Lord (*St. Matthew* 17: 1 – 9; *St. Mark* 9: 2 – 10; *St. Luke* 9: 28 – 36; *2 Peter* 1: 16 – 19) is one of the most important yet most neglected events recorded in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> I wholeheartedly agree. Briefly reviewing my theological training, spiritual formation and pastoral ministry, I am ashamed to say that this critical event has historically had very little cognitive influence on my daily life.

This is disturbing for a number of reasons, but mostly because of its objective theological importance and subjective spiritual capacity to change lives. If God's written word has seen fit to emphasize this event, and devout persons throughout history have also sought to visually depict what was communicated, I am convinced that intense and informed visual (icon) and verbal (inscription) reflection upon the Transfiguration has a unique capacity to not only change my life, but, also, the lives of every human being. The Transfiguration is history, health and hope for humanity.

This crucial event is **history**. It really happened. It is not specious speculation, but an event which was observed. In his second letter, St. Peter tells us that the Transfiguration was not a “cleverly devised” tale, but, rather, an “eyewitnesses” experience. And it is to be noted, with absolute joy, that this history is our heritage.

This crucial event promotes **health**. Do we actually believe God? Do we actually believe and seek to assimilate what He has communicated in and through His written word? Saint Paul, in 2 Corinthians 3: 18, hints at the great possibility and promise of changing our lives through contemplation upon the image of God. Originally created in the image and likeness of God, and fallen from our primal grace, we have received the

abundance of God's mercy through Jesus Christ. God's offering of himself in Christ has secured our healing. Isaiah the prophet tells us that we are healed through the "stripes" our Lord endured for us (Isaiah 53: 5). St. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, "What has not been assumed has not been healed."<sup>2</sup> In Christ our sins are "assumed," and we shall be like him as we behold him as he is.

This crucial event encourages **hope**. It is hope because the Transfiguration does not simply dwell in the past as an historic event. Instead, as with the Sacraments (albeit differently), the Transfiguration is an historic "happening" of current significance. It exists in the perpetual "now." By observing the Transfiguration *we can be transformed*. Just as Peter, James and John were forever changed by this event, we can "behold" and be changed. What we "behold" we become.

Although these meditations are suitable for any occasion, they are specifically intended as a devotional resource for the forty days between the Transfiguration (August 6) and Holy Cross Day (September 14). The format of these meditations is simple, following a pattern that I have used in other texts written for the seasons of Lent and Advent.<sup>3</sup> In this volume we will also be asked to reflect upon an icon of the Transfiguration. In this way, our quest to be like Christ will be both visually and verbally enhanced.

Our lives have a context, in fact many contexts, by which we come to understand the world, our neighbors, ourselves and God. Similarly, the Transfiguration has a specific context which requires careful consideration. As you read and reflect upon these meditations you will note that I do not begin or end with *specific* references being made to the Transfiguration. At first this may seem unusual; after all, these meditations are

intended to focus upon this important event. Upon analysis, however, there is a reason for my approach: In order to understand and apply the message of Christ's Transfiguration, or any life-event, we must appreciate the context in which it took place. It is crucial for the reader to understand, therefore, the *entire* context in which the Transfiguration occurred. Without this context, significant life-lessons would be lost. The disciples needed to learn about how to walk in the light of the Transfiguration, in all of its life-contexts, and so must we. As such, as with everyday life, context tells us a great deal about the content. If we want to know the content of anything we must understand the context.

It is my hope that these meditations will fill a need that has often been neglected, and help us to become more like Christ as we are transformed into his image.

Donald P. Richmond  
*Commemoration of the Appearance of our Lord to St. Thomas after the Resurrection*

## **One Now**

### **“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi...”- St. Matthew 16: 13**

“Now” is not only a word or a literary device which is used to communicate urgency or immediacy. The immediacy of Christ’s activities exists for each and every one of us throughout every day of our lives. We all live in the perpetual “now” of God’s activities and our own personal choices. God consistently acts and speaks. However, we do not always recognize God’s movements among and within us.

The disciples were no exception to this unfortunate assertion. Time and time again the disciples overlooked the obvious. God in Christ was consistently with them, speaking to them and performing great signs and wonders among them. And yet, on more than one occasion, they did not seem to appreciate or apprehend the magnitude of who Christ was or what he was doing. This, in fact, is directly related to a significant lack of prayer on the part of the disciples.

In our text, the “now” of opportunity occurs in a certain geographic location and is illuminated by solitary prayer (cf. *St. Luke 9: 18*). It was from the place of prayer in this solitary place that our Lord chose to uniquely reveal himself to his disciples. Similarly, the topography of our own socio-psycho-pneumatic lives is dynamically redrawn through solitude and prayer. Prayer and solitude make the “now” far more accessible. Prayer and solitude help us to “hear” and “see” more clearly. If we are going to avoid the ill-preparedness of spiritual somnolence, and enjoy the revelation of God, we must make prayer and solitude a greater priority.

## Two Context

**“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” - St. Matthew 16: 13**

Everything in the Bible and in life has a context. Context is important. Although the Transfiguration of our Lord encompasses the past, present and future, the immediate biblical context is the question which Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

This is not a theoretical question. It is pointed, purposeful and powerful. The answer to this question not only determines our eternal destiny, but also our current condition. The content of how we will live our lives, and how and if we can change, is decisively answered by our response.

Jesus asks each one of us about his identity. As with the initial philosophic response of his disciples, there are numerous “answers.” Some people suggest that Jesus was a good man, even a great man, but only a man. Many say that he was a prophet. Others propose him to have been a rabbi, sage, liberator, or radical anarchist. The list of possibilities is both endless and, in many cases, ridiculous.

But who do *you* say that Jesus is, and how have you arrived at this determination? The Bible tells us that Jesus made certain claims about himself, claims which require our loyalty. Beyond standard answers of philosophic interest, the answer which Jesus expects, and which St. Peter acknowledges later in our text, is far more personal and pertinent. The answer to the question, the only adequate answer, is that “Jesus is Lord!” How do you answer this question?

### **Three Who?**

**‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”**

**- St. Matthew 16: 13**

Most of us, in fact all of us apart from the grace of God, are decidedly and devotedly self-centered. Everything in our lives revolves around the unholy trinity of “me, myself and I.” Who I am and what I want are the final arbiters of the decision making process. In this state, we consume others and are also consumed by the unbridled passions that have dominated human history. Dante’s *Hell* is crammed full of those who consume and are consumed, most graphically illustrated in its icy self-devouring final division on the ninth circle.

We want what we want when we want it, and the litany of this self-centeredness is “more.” We want more money, more luxuries, more power and more fulfillment. The list is as endless and diverse as the human personality.

When Jesus asked his disciples about who he was, and about what people were saying about him, it was not because he had a poor self-image that needed bolstering. It wasn’t because he enjoyed hearing about himself. He did not want or need human affirmation (*St. John 2: 23 – 25*). We often ask such questions for these reasons, but he did not. The question he asked was entirely motivated to provide insight, revelation and active faith --- nothing more. The “more” with which our Lord was concerned was the giving of “more” of himself to us in order to fulfill the will of the Father.

If we are going to see and enjoy God in a greater way, if we are going to have “more” of him, we will need to become less concerned about ourselves and our image.

## **Four Confession**

**“Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”**

**-St. Matthew 16: 13**

St. Peter’s confession was a turning point for him and the other disciples. Upon this confession, Christ’s strategy of instruction dramatically changed. Hereafter, our Lord is far more verbal about his passion and death. From this point onward, Christ was quite clear about his mission and the meaning of his being the Christ.

The world changed at the moment of this confession. Peter’s awakening and words revealed the true nature of God’s ecclesial economy, kingdom building, spiritual warfare, and discipleship. This acknowledgment of Jesus as Christ transfigured everything, shedding an entirely different light upon human understanding of God’s eternal intention.

This confession transformed St. Peter’s life. The heart-confession, “Jesus is Christ,” will change each of us as well. But it will change us in a way that we do not expect. The process of change that we read about in many self-help books is radically different than what Peter experienced. Self-help (and there is a proper place for this) is about work, about doing what we can for ourselves. The change that comes from an acknowledgment of Jesus as Christ is a gift, a grace. The New Testament tells us that God works *in the believer* both to “will” and to “do” of His good pleasure. The desire and the doing are a result of our confession imbued with the Spirit. Within the proper context, our transformation is God’s work in, for and through us.

## **Five Blessed**

**“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”  
- St. Matthew 16: 17**

We want a happy and carefree life. Those of us who live in the United States believe that “the pursuit of happiness” is our inalienable right. This expectation is so pronounced in our culture that we often fail to appreciate that there are times when our own personal happiness interferes with the happiness of others. One of my neighbors believes it is his right to play his music so loud that it, quite literally, shakes the walls of my home. I think it is my right to enjoy silence. If he does not have loud sound, he is angry. If I cannot enjoy pronounced silence, I am annoyed. And this personal vignette is just the barest tip of the frigid iceberg that invariably sinks our spiritual ships.

Jesus does not in any way promise us personal happiness. At no time does he suggest that the reward of discipleship is happiness. Anyone who even casually examines Christ’s calling, to take up our cross and follow him, can begin to imagine that living the crucified life is a happy experience.

Our Lord does, however, promise us a life of blessedness. The Beatitudes (*St. Matthew 5: 2 – 11*) and Christ’s words to St. Peter in our text make this quite clear. The Rev. Dr. John Stott makes a very fine distinction between happiness and blessedness when he writes, “happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective judgment....He is declaring not what they may feel like (“happy”), but what God thinks of them and on that account they are (“blessed”).”<sup>4</sup>

## Six Simon

**“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 17

Who was this man to whom God revealed himself through His Only Begotten Son? He certainly wasn't a "Saint," at least from our own very limited perspective. Simon, also called Peter, was a person very much like you or me. He had his strengths, weaknesses, successes and glaring failures.

Like each of us, he also had a least two very positive things going for him: He was called by God and he was chosen to receive the revelation of Christ in his glory. As believers in Jesus Christ we are also called and chosen to *see* and *know* him.

But seeing and knowing God has its price. Absolute devotion is the high price we must pay, just as St. Peter himself paid. Peter's strength was that he was entirely devoted to Christ. It was also, in some odd way, his great weakness. When not entirely devoted to God, St Peter reverted to his old self-assured (not Spirit-inspired) attitudes. These are clearly evidenced in his very loud assertion of loyalty coupled with his threefold denial. He was clearly an "all or nothing" guy.

Like Peter, assured of our calling and choosing, we must learn to humbly seek to follow Christ without reservation. We must become bold in our pursuit of God. In fact, we must be so bold as to be extravagant. To be extravagant for God has its risks, but followers of Christ take such risks. Revelation does not come to those who are lazy in either faith or following. Saints are made through extravagant devotion. Peter was a perfect example of extravagant faith.

## Seven Revelation

**“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**  
**- St. Matthew 16: 17**

Our Lord’s words to St. Peter place the entire theological enterprise in proper perspective. We are prone to think that it is our task to discover the will, ways and works of God. *We* must make every effort to ask, knock and seek. *We* must probe the depths of the biblical text in order for God to reveal Himself to us.

And, indeed, all due diligence must be applied if we are going to apprehend God. But our text suggests a strong moderating orientation. Without God taking the initiative, we would have no way of seeking and finding Him. That is, we must be apprehended by God before we can apprehend (in some very limited capacity) Him. Theology is an enterprise entirely structured upon the initiative, the revelation, of God. To reverse or ignore this principle invariably leads to unwholesome, man-made, religion.

This is not to suggest that *all* religion is bad. In fact, all religion is not bad. It was God-established religion that provided us with the Old Testament sacrificial system. It was Christ who gave us the sacraments, all of which are in some way an exercise of religion. Good religion is established by God and orders our approach to Him according to His standards. Bad religion elevates human standards as the final arbiter of any decision.

How are we approaching God? Unless we seek and find Him on His terms, our every effort will fail. We must do God’s works in God’s ways.

## Eight Father

**“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 17

It has often been suggested that pride is the root of all sin. I am not sure about this. Certainly pride is deadly and must be addressed. However, upon examining the biblical text, most especially the account of the Fall as recorded in the book of *Genesis*, I think fear is more primal than pride. Fear is at the root of every sin because, in some way, fear and death are always inextricably bound to each other. Fear is “hell,” and pride is the means through which we descend into it.

The answer to fear is being apprehended by the loving Father. Within the context of our reading and meditation, this means that we have a God who is good, gracious and generous. Our God *wants* to give. Our God *wants* to reveal Himself to us. This revelation is most perfectly seen and experienced in Jesus Christ. As our Lord told Philip, and each one of us, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (*St. John* 14: 9). God’s love is most perfectly revealed and fulfilled in Christ.

This was God’s purpose: To reveal Himself to the world. His priority was to make Himself known and available to each one of us. He is not stingy. He is not reluctant. He is not fickle. He does not change. His purpose is forever fixed, and our resistance to Him and His will has no bearing whatsoever on God’s intention. The oft-cited evangelical text remains “constant:” “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (*St. John* 3: 16). God loves us. Love overcomes fear.

## **Nine Rock**

**“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”  
- St Matthew 16: 18**

The question about how Christ builds his Church is an important one, and is complicated by a number of biblical, theological and historic issues. Critical to our answer is the prayerful consideration of what “rock” implies in our text. Is the rock a person or is it the revelation of Christ leading to faith? That is, does our Lord build upon Peter or upon faith?

Examining the Bible, there is no either / or dichotomy between the two. One does not have precedence over the other because both are essential. God in Christ by the Holy Spirit uses people (the Church), specifically those people who have had the revelation of faith. God uses those who embrace faith and wrestle with its demands --- and faith does have its very hearty demands.

Faith has demands, and we should not forget this. An easy faith does not exist. We must be vigilant. We must be vigorous. And we must understand that, in spite of our best efforts, faith is a gift from God. We are recipients of revelation.

As recipients, we cannot build faith on our own terms. Faith must be built on the solid facts of revelation and not the shifting sands of our imagination. Stewards pass on; they do not invent or introduce questionable innovation.

Revelation places upon each of us a high and holy calling. We are stewards of revelation, stewards of faith, and cannot do with it as we wish.

## Ten Build

**“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**  
- St Matthew 16: 18

*God* builds His Church. As the people of God we are God’s workers and God’s building blocks, but He ultimately does the work. This is not always easy for us to accept. Human beings, most especially those of us who are the historic inheritors of western Secular Humanism, believe that we must make our own way. We think that we must “do it” ourselves. The self-made man is our ideal.

But this is not how God works. As stated in an earlier meditation, God is the one who initiates. God’s pre-existing grace always precedes the practice of faith. God is the One who starts and finishes His work in and through us (*Philippians* 2: 13).

God builds upon the foundation of *faith*. This is odd. We often think that faith is somewhat illusory and intangible. We think thoughts suggesting that faith never put food on the table or a roof over our heads. But this is a misperception. We need to see more clearly.

In contrast to this, the Bible tells us that faith is real substance (*Hebrews* 11: 1), and is in fact the foundation of all action. One cannot do anything in life without some measure of “faith” being exercised. The crucial issue is the *quality* and *quantity* of faith. Faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains (*St. Matthew* 17: 20), and can transform our lives and the world.

## Eleven Church

**“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**  
- St Matthew 16: 18

The Church is not our property. We do not own it, and we do not have authority over it. The people of God – those who are called and chosen – constitute the Church and, with Christ as the Chief Cornerstone, live under its authority.

We don't like authority, and we certainly don't like submitting to it. To be sure, properly exercised authority is far easier to endure than is the exercise of raw power. Nevertheless, any yoke chafes us (we think) unmercifully.

As we examine Scripture and the iconic interpretation of the Transfiguration, an entirely different perspective prevails. Authority is good and necessary, providing an order that resists the entropy in and of the world. Authority reveals and renews.

Authority is inherent to the Transfiguration: Christ is supremely elevated, with the Law and the Prophets (represented by Moses and Elijah) slightly below him and the Apostles prostrate before him. The word from the Father is clear: *Listen to Jesus Christ!*

Prostration must be the chosen and perpetual position of the Church --- and each and every one of us. This physical position reflects the ongoing spiritual condition of our abject spiritual poverty. This is the true asceticism and the human foundation of revelation and renewal.

## **Twelve Hell**

**“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”  
- St Matthew 16: 18**

Hell is not simply a destination that some may arrive at in the “there and then,” it is a “here and now” experience for a great many people. Many suffer with deep psychological and emotional issues. Countless thousands seek professional and pastoral care for help and healing. For these people, and many more, life is a living hell.

At the risk of sounding rather simplistic, the experience of hell is almost always a matter of personal choice. Moreover, the answer to our every hell is God. Every human being who has ever lived, apart from Jesus Christ, does not like this answer. We prefer our own “answers” because they are an expression of our own will done in our own way. That is, we prefer the “quick fix” without submitting to God.

And this is precisely the problem. God has designed us to be salvifically related to Him. Our identity, purpose in life and power for living are all dynamically connected to this primal relationship. The more we move away from this, the unhealthier we become.

The world, the flesh, and the devil are all arrayed against us. This is both objectively real and subjectively experienced. We do not fight against “flesh and blood,” but against “principalities and powers” intended to discourage, distort and destroy us. The good news is that as we place ourselves properly before God and each other, even when we struggle and suffer, hell will not prevail. When we are properly related to God, our lives become ordered.

## **Thirteen Hell (2)**

**“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”  
- St Matthew 16: 18**

Sin and hell always have a social context. Even the most private sin that results in an intimate personal hell will always have social – in fact cosmic – implications.

St. Augustine of Hippo clearly defined the distinctions between the city of God and the city of humanity. The former, the city of God, is built upon kingdom principles as found in the Sermon on the Mount and is centered upon Christ the King. The latter, the city of humanity, is structured upon self-centered principles that can be found in *Genesis* 11. In verse 4 of this text we read, “Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” Even a brief examination of these few words tell us that the kingdoms of this world are built upon self-assertion (“build”), self-centeredness (“ourselves”), man-made religion (“top in the heavens”), and fear (“lest we be dispersed”). All of these efforts are in direct opposition to what God commanded in *Genesis* 9:1 (“fill the earth”) and invariably ends in babble (*Genesis* 11: 7).

In other words, we will either be engaged in building God’s kingdom or our own. We cannot have it both ways. As the people of God, both as individuals and as communities, we must build God’s kingdom in God’s way. Without exception this will require sacrifice. Unless we build God’s Church in God’s way, our every effort will be understood as babble and not endure.

## Fourteen Give

**“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 19

Revelation is rewarded, and illustrates the “grace upon grace” goodness of God (*St. John* 1: 16). In the context of *St. Matthew* 16, St. Peter’s revelation regarding Jesus as Christ resulted in God’s gifting (on behalf of the whole Church) of “the keys” to him. The revelation of the transfigured Christ will, similarly, result in rewards and responsibilities for us.

Our God is a giving God. He gives freely, if not indiscriminately and recklessly. If you doubt this generosity, briefly reflect upon the Parable of the Sower and of the Lost Sheep. God gives, and gives freely, but there are also expectations placed upon those of us who have received these gifts. The Parable of the Talents aptly communicates this principle.

How are we using the gifts and the talents that God has bestowed upon each and every one of us? This is an important question, and our answer very pointedly determines the quality and quantity of gifts God gives us. Our answer may also very well determine our eternal condition. If we do not properly use the revelations, graces and gifts that God has given, why would He give us more? If we misuse God’s gifts, we misuse them to our own destruction.

## Fifteen Keys

**“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 19

We have been given the gift of “the keys,” and the weight of binding and loosing is heavy upon each and every one of us. We must therefore know what they are and how to use them.

As we examine the question of “the keys” within the context of the entire sweep of the Transfiguration, we are provided some insight regarding both their implication and their application. Earlier in *St. Matthew* 16, Jesus warns his disciples against “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” We understand their teaching to be decidedly focused upon the law with little consideration of grace, mercy, or truth. In *St. Matthew* 16: 17, Jesus mentions the “gates of hell.” Later in our text, right before the Transfiguration, our Lord describes his suffering, death, and resurrection. Our Lord also makes it very clear that his cross must be our cross (*St. Matthew* 16: 24 – 28).

Within our text, “the keys” correct the prevailing hell that exists in our world because we forget love, focus upon law, and refuse to freely “loose” others through the offering of Christ’s forgiveness through his death, resurrection, and ascension. Forgiveness is the gift of keys that each of us must bear. This gift is a painful Sacrament. We must bear these keys, and with Christ descend into hell, because the Church (as Christ’s body) is a Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our purpose in Christ is to reconcile the world to God. Are we freeing others through the gift of God’s forgiveness?

## Sixteen Loosing

**“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 19

One of the primary problems of our Church and society today is a noted lack of emphasis upon sin. Our focus is decidedly upon the affirmation of the human person. At best, for many people, we reluctantly embrace a semi-Pelagian orientation: We have sometimes behaved badly, but we are not fundamentally bad people.

Emphasizing an Old Testament passage, St. Paul tells us that that *none of us are good and all of us have strayed* from God. Although this may sound rather dark and gloomy, it is a reality. We are sinners and we are inherently separated from the life of God.

There is very good news in this orientation, although we negatively react to it. Unless we understand sin, we cannot understand forgiveness. Unless we appreciate how very bound we are, we can never come to appreciate God’s liberating grace. Egypt provides a clearer perspective on the possibilities of a Promised Land.

The primary responsibility of the Church is the celebration and proclamation of the saving acts of God.<sup>5</sup> In order to effectively do this, there are times when we must expose sin. The intolerable weight of guilt and shame must be experienced before we can celebrate freedom. The road to health begins with admitting we are sick. Being slothful about sin will, among other things, limit how much God can reveal to us.

## Seventeen Binding

**“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 19

The Bible tells us that the intention of God is to set us free and have us live in this freedom. In order to accomplish this purpose we must first accept that we are fallen from grace and separated from God. By the grace and mercy of God, accompanied by the salvific work of the Holy Spirit, repentance and faith prove to be the necessary corrective.

This emphasis on sin, guilt and separation is just one side of the truth, however. Holy Scripture tells us that we were, and remain, created in the image of God. We are made for Him, and are intended to walk with Him and be like Him. That is, upon creation and redemption, we are blessed of God. Indeed, God calls us and His entire creation “very good” (*Genesis* 1: 31).

Our creation in the image of God must not be overlooked or neglected. Both our dignity and our depravity must be embraced if we are going to be whole. If we are going to be “transfigured,” changed, we must understand that we are a “glorious ruin.”<sup>6</sup>

There are many people who think that repentance and faith return us to God *and to the persons we have never been*. This is not the case. Repentance and faith does, indeed, return us to God, *and also to the persons God originally created us to be*. Our re-creation in Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit is to the image and the likeness of God --- God’s original intention, and more. Being “loosed” is a return.

## **Eighteen Tell No One**

**“Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”**

**- St. Matthew 16: 20**

Being created in the image of God, we share in a number of His character qualities. Like God we want to speak. We are created to communicate. This need to speak becomes all the more pressing when we have good news to share. When we experience something wonderful we want to express it.

This is precisely why sharing faith in Christ was not, at least in the primitive Church, a burden. The Apostolic Church and the Church of the Fathers was so consumed by the gracious love of God that sharing was “second nature.” They experienced the profound “good news” of Jesus Christ and *wanted* to express it.

In our text from St. Matthew, the disciples (as expressed through St. Peter) received a profound revelation of God: Jesus was Christ. This revelation was a decisive turning point on every level. Why would they not want to share their insight, the product of God’s revelatory action? Why, then, did our Lord tell them to remain silent?

The answer to these questions, most particularly the latter, is not directly answered. However, in spite of this, an answer can be deduced. Jesus had not suffered and died. The disciples had not yet experienced the hope of glory as seen in the Transfiguration. In short, they had inspiration and insight without having had the tempering effect of struggle and suffering to temper their elation. That is, like us, they needed time to grow into their knowing. Knowledge without wisdom is damning.

## Nineteen Suffer

**“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”**  
- St. Matthew 16: 21

Beyond the revelation that led to Peter’s confession and the Transfiguration, Jesus wanted to show his disciples other realities. Suffering was critical to these “showings.” Suffering has never been a popular pastime. This is understandable. No reasonable person wants to experience pain and suffering. And let’s not forget death. We hide from suffering, but we fly from death. The denial of death<sup>7</sup> leads to a multitude of socio-psycho-pneumatic problems.

Jesus had an entirely different perspective. He saw purpose in suffering and death. Consequently, when the time was right, he was clear and decisive about his need to endure all the indignities of his passion, cross, and death.

St. Peter did not understand or embrace (at this point) this necessity, and in fact resisted it (vs. 22). Acting and speaking presumptively and unwisely, he was roundly rebuked for his satanic suggestion (vs. 23).

We also refuse to accept the necessity of suffering and death in a fallen world. But if we are going to be healthy, help others, walk with God, and experience resurrection, we need to do so. This is the economy of Christ’s kingdom (*Colossians* 1: 24). Puritan author, Matthew Henry, tells us that the cross always precedes the crown.

## Twenty Follow

**“Then Jesus told his disciples, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”  
- St. Matthew 16: 24**

As we examine our lives against the background of our text, we discover that Jesus uses a number of words that trouble us deeply. Given a certain context, the word “follow” may appear somewhat innocuous. As children we play “follow the leader” and have a great deal of fun. We follow each other to meetings, clubs, churches and restaurants, so that we don’t get lost and we arrive together. In politics we follow our leaders, albeit not always with the same elation as children. But when the word “follow” is coupled with other words such as “deny” and “cross,” the concept of following becomes far more costly.

Nevertheless, following is important. We need to be infused with new insight and be embraced by a heavenly perspective. Although there is a cost in following, and Jesus urges us to count the cost, there is a far greater expense in *not* following. Our Lord makes it quite clear that a refusal to follow has eternal consequences ---- as well as temporal.

In the economics of God’s kingdom, the requisite of following Christ invariably leads to new life (resurrection) and new authority (ascension) in our lives. With proper perspective, we can see that suffering and death are not dead ends from which we can find no exit. Instead, God who is the Great Amen always leads us into greater freedom.

## Twenty-One After

**“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother...”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 1

The Transfiguration, the unique revelation of Jesus Christ to the disciples on Mount Tabor, occurred within certain contexts. These contexts, both preceding and following this event, provide insights about its understanding, interpretation, and application.

Issues regarding the identity of Jesus as Christ, struggle, suffering, self-denial, death, resurrection and ascension all provide the backdrop in which the “theatre” of the Transfiguration occurred. Without appreciating these contexts, we could not understand the “why?” of this illuminating event or the “how?” of personal change. Without these contexts the event of the Transfiguration would be a picture, but it would not be an icon. It might be image, but it might lack the capacity of likeness. It would inspire, but would lack the ability to transform.

*Within* these contextual realities, Jesus was Transfigured and the “voice borne from heaven” spoke (2 *Peter* 1: 16 – 21). Saints Peter, James and John were not entirely sure how to respond. The disciples needed the time and the tempering to be able to observe and respond to this event. So do we.

This order must also be personally observed by each of us. God has His time and His way. He chooses whom He wills, and issues His calling as He pleases. He has a process and a purpose for His self-disclosures. Patience, prayer and obedience are therefore required if we are going to enjoy the *after* of God’s intention.

## Twenty-Two Led

**“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.”** - St. Matthew 17: 1

Again we return to a central theme of Christian theology and personal growth. God must do the work He wishes to do in and through us. We cannot do God’s work on our own. We need God to both initiate and complete His good works.

This means that self-improvement is only of limited value and impact. In fact, when examined, **self-help** may in fact be contrary to the will and ways of God. At best, self-help (using the words of Jesus) cleans the “outside of the cup,” but frequently leaves the inside of the cup a festering mess. Self-help might change how we look, but does very little to change who we are. God wants to change us from the inside – out.

But we must have a balanced perspective. God by His Holy Spirit does work within each of us. Nevertheless, as *Philippians 2: 12* tells us, we must also “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling.” We cooperate with God.

Our text tells us that Jesus **took and led** his disciples. The role of the disciple is to follow. Throughout the gospels we are told that Christ’s disciples followed him. This is not simply a statement of physical geography, but, rather, of spiritual disposition. Disciples follow where Jesus takes us and leads us.

Are we following Christ? Failing to follow will result in our failing to see what God wants to reveal to us.

## Twenty-Three By Themselves

**“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” - St. Matthew 17: 1**

Although we were created from community (The Trinity), within community (The family) and for community (The Church), a great deal of life is lived alone. In some ways, viewed from a certain perspective, we are born, live and die alone. This polar existence between community and individuality, the personal and the public, is a bit of a conundrum.

Similarly, spiritual insight and development often occur when we are alone. Moses had his years of being alone while tending sheep for Jethro. Elijah had his years in the wilderness while Israel suffered drought. Jesus had his time of being alone, and he repeatedly encouraged his disciples to go away with him. Public worship and fellowship certainly play an important part in the process of spiritual formation, but so must our “prayer closet.” There are times when it is good to be alone.

But we do not always enjoy being alone. We are sometimes afraid of being alone. We *prefer* companionship ---- a camaraderie that all too often breeds distraction. What we *need*, however, is a lack of distractions. Being alone, if we ask God to help us, can empower us to hear and see life more clearly. Being alone encourages a clearer perspective. Being alone, by God’s grace, awakens us to the revelations of God. Let us therefore learn and live the discipline of solitude.

## Twenty-Four Transfigured

**“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 2

During the writing of these meditations, I have been prayerfully examining two icons of the Transfiguration. The one I purchased from *Monastery Icons* is placed, among other icons, in my office. It, so to speak, “oversees” my writing. The other, a Transfiguration of the Novrogod School (15<sup>th</sup> century), rests beside my bed. It is the last thing I see before I fall asleep. (And, indeed, does not Holy Scripture tell us that when we shall awake we shall be like Him?)

As I have been “standing” before these icons, I have found that a shift in attitude has begun to happen. New and personal insights are graciously given me. It is almost like the icon “speaks” to me, illuminating my shortcomings and urging me to ascend up Mount Tabor, stay awake, and listen to Christ.

And this is precisely what we are called to do if we are going to see God and be changed into His glorious image. We are to follow Christ where he goes, ascending (See 17: 1) or descending (See 17: 9, 14 - 16) into every life-situation that Christ himself would enter. We must be with Christ to be like Christ.

We are not told how long the disciples were on Mount Tabor. Moses spent a great deal of time on the Mountain of God. Elijah spent over three years by the “brook Cherith” awaiting the word and direction of God. We also will have to wait and watch and pray. Transfiguration, at least for us, is not an event but a lifestyle.

## Twenty-Five Light

**“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 2

The word “light” is frequently used throughout the Bible and communicates different truths and realities that are all, in some way, centered in Christ himself. Light played an important role in the first days of creation (*Genesis* 1: 3). Throughout the *Psalms*, the word “light” is used to communicate the way in which God calls us to walk. *Psalms* 119: 105 is an example of this when the psalmist tells us that God’s word is “a light to my path.” *Isaiah* 2: 5 echoes this emphasis.

Jesus himself refers to himself as light when he announces that he is “the light of the world” (*St. John* 8: 12). As our Lord is The Word, it is not surprising that he is also The Light. According to *St. John* 1: 4, Jesus is the light *and* life of the world. Anyone who was lost in sin, and has been found by Christ, can attest to the truth of this assertion. His light, he who is The Light, is life for the lost.

The light of the Transfiguration communicates all of these realities, and a great deal more. When our Lord was transfigured, his transfiguration embraced the ancient light of creation, redemption and the consummation of all things (*Revelation* 1: 13; 22:5).

Like Christ, we also are to be and walk in the light (cf. *Romans* 13: 12 and *1 John* 1:7). There is help and hope in knowing that this light, which is life in Christ, encompasses all. We can therefore say, with Julian of Norwich, “all is well and all will be well.”

## Twenty-Six Behold

**“And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”  
- St. Matthew 17: 3**

To behold God can be terrifying, as the Gospel narratives of the Transfiguration make clear. As we examine the experiences of God throughout the Bible, references to terror and fear are common. In the Old Testament, the person who “saw” God believed that immanent death was assured.

This fear was exaggerated because the disciples not only saw the transfigured Christ, but also saw Moses and Elijah. It is quite possible, if not in some way likely, that they assumed that the entire weight of the Law and the Prophets was about to fall upon them. This response is not foreign to any one of us, most especially to those of us who have experienced the judgment of our own sin, guilt and shame.

But the confession of Peter (Jesus is Christ), and the relationship the disciples enjoyed with Christ, somewhat tempered their fear. They may not have entirely understood the significance of this vision, but they did think that the experience of Christ transfigured – accompanied by the principal representatives of Law and Prophets – was worth preserving and proclaiming. St. Peter even said that it was “good” for the apostles to be there.

And St. Peter in some way grasped the mystery: *When Christ is present, in spite of our sin, it is “good” for us to be with him.* Like St. Peter, we may not always understand “why,” but we know that with Christ all is well.

## Twenty-Seven Talking

**“And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”**

**- St. Matthew 17: 3**

The great Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, wrote, “Language is given to men to profess, praise, witness, pray. Whatever does not enter these categories is not only unnecessary, but can be harmful.”<sup>8</sup> When Moses and Elijah appeared with the transfigured Christ, they were not engaged in idle chit-chat. Weighty matters were at hand. Weighty matters were discussed. St. Luke tells us that the discussion centered upon our Lord’s “departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem” (*St. Luke* 9: 31). The “departure,” which St. Luke mentions, referred to our Lord’s passion and death outside the gates of Jerusalem.

Death is worthy of discussion. Often we want to avoid any mention of it. We eliminate references of death from children’s literature and from the “polite” conversation we have around the dinner table. More than politics and religion, death is entirely off limits in good company. Any reminder of death is quickly swept under the “rug” of conscious thought or community engagement, and we revert to other distractions. Death is a dirty word.

*We don’t talk about death nearly enough.* If we know Christ and are known by him, conversations about death will always be moderated by the awareness and assurance of resurrection and new life.

If we are to talk, let us have weighty conversations. If we walk, let us walk in the full light of Christ: his cross, death, resurrection and ascension.

## Twenty-Eight Tents

**“And Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”**

**- St. Matthew 17: 4**

Human beings have great difficulty in letting go. We like to hold on, and keep on holding on, to whatever and whomever we think we have. We become attached, even if the experience we enjoyed was short-lived. Sin militates against letting go.

Saints Peter, James and John had just seen and experienced a remarkable vision. Christ was uniquely revealed to them. It is understandable that they would want to prolong and preserve this revelation.

Beyond this desire to hold on, there also appears to have been some measure of unwholesome self-assertion or promotion involved. St. Peter said that it was good that they were all (“We”) there, but it was only Peter (“I”) who would build the tents. As with his earlier resistance to God’s eternal plan (*St. Matthew* 16: 22 – 23), Peter again asserts himself and entirely misses the point.

Most of us also miss the point. Like the children of Israel in the wilderness<sup>9</sup>, we are all simply “passing through” on our way to the Promised Land. God provides us a vision of who he is, not that we might *hold on* (“Build Tents”) but so that we might *move on* (*St. Matthew* 17: 7 – 9). Rising up, not settling down, is what God intends for us. We must learn to let go of our attachments --- even our attachments to those things that are essentially good. We must learn, as one of my teachers suggested, the “sanctification of the relaxed grasp.”

## Twenty-Nine Cloud

**“He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 5

I have seen some very bright clouds, most especially in paintings by Constable or by painters from the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Icons uniquely communicate great clouds of heavenly majesty. The cloud referenced in our text was brighter, far brighter, than anything we have seen or experienced.

Meditating upon this cloud, I am reminded of another in *Exodus* 13: 21: “And the Lord went before [the children of Israel] by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way.” We tend to think of clouds as shrouding us from the sun. We tend to think of clouds as obscuring. The cloud in our texts, as well as in other biblical texts such as *Ezekiel* 1: 4 – 28, does not conceal but, instead, reveals, inspires and leads.<sup>10</sup>

And it is precisely the revelation of God that we need. It is the *only* thing we need. More often than not, we function in a “fog.” We go through the motions of life without ever living. Some people live “under a cloud” of fear and flight. Many people are so immersed in life’s secondary considerations that they become hollow shells of human beings, the “hollow men” of T. S. Eliot’s poem. We need a vision, the vision, of God.

To some degree we are all under the cloud, and we are in good company. Moses and Israel were under the cloud. The disciples were under a cloud. But it was a “bright” cloud, a cloud of revelation and direction. God spoke from the cloud. God’s grace and our choice determine what type of cloud we will be under: bright or dark.

## Thirty Voice

**“He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 5

The beginning (*St. Matthew 3: 17*) and the end (*St. Matthew 17: 5*) of our Lord’s ministry is punctuated by these words from the Father. These are well-chosen words highlighting God’s main point. They punctuate purpose. The main point is that Christ came into the world to save sinners, and it was his death (and, later, resurrection and ascension) that secured our salvation --- which is, of course, all-encompassing. As the Bible tells us, and we often forget, Christ was crucified from the foundation of the world. The crucifixion was not an after-thought of an experiment gone horribly wrong.

These words from God, spoken at the beginning and end of Christ’s earthly ministry, introduce us to two excruciating events in the life of our Lord. The first word preceded Christ’s wilderness temptations. The second word introduces us to Christ’s suffering and death. God speaks to us in the wilderness and the suffering and the deaths that punctuate and permeate each of our lives.

Jesus may have “needed” these words from God. He may have needed to have the affirmation of his unique Sonship. And he is not unique in this. There are times, many times, when we need to hear from God and know that we are his beloved adopted children. Words like these strengthen and encourage us. The good news is that God has spoken and God will speak --- most especially in times of trial. Wait for the Lord. Listen.

## **Thirty-One Voice (2)**

**“He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.”**  
**- St. Matthew 17: 5**

Where do we hear God’s voice? This question cuts to the core of spiritual direction and formation. The guidance of God must be found – in fact, it must find us – or we will be lost.

Simple yet crucial answers can be given in answer to this question. We must turn to Christ, the Living Word, to find God. No one, according to St. John’s Gospel, comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. We must reflect upon Holy Scripture. Creeds provide guidance. Traditions can be useful. Prayerful advice from mature Christians can help. Entering into true worship is indispensable. All of these “speak.”

Nevertheless, regardless of these many graces, there are times when clear answers, clear directions, are not available. On certain “fundamentals” or “essentials” there may be great clarity, but with many routine issues we need further guidance. God must speak.

God must speak, and we must wait. The psalmist repeatedly admonishes the reader (or listener) to “wait.” Waiting on God is essential to growth.

Are we in need of guidance? Is there a lack of clear direction? Wait. Listen. Obey.

## Thirty-Two Listen

**“He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.”**  
- St. Matthew 17: 5

Many “voices” compete for our attention. Billboards clamor for notice as we drive from place to place. Televisions and Radios provide a cacophony of non-essential opportunities. Cell phones and e-mails beckon for *immediate* response. And these, as well as many other distractions, do not even touch upon all of the philosophies and religions offering quick-fix “answers” to life’s most persistent problems.

The disciples were not so much distracted by “stuff” as they were by sleep. Our text tells us that the disciples slept during at least part of the Transfiguration. In other texts throughout the four gospels they were also asleep. It was only by God’s grace that Peter, James and John saw the vision and heard the voice. Both voice and vision might have entirely eluded them if they were not somehow aroused and awakened. Similarly, if we are in any way distracted or “asleep,” we too might miss the voice and the vision.

Unlike the disciples (and the Unwise Virgins who, also, did not remain awake), we must cultivate habits of attentiveness. By attentive obedience we are called to discern between all of the competing voices clamoring for our attention. We must learn to listen, and hear God “only.” Peter, James and John are told to “listen to [Christ].” God’s people hear and heed the voice of God.

### Thirty-Three Faces

**“When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise and have no fear. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”** - St. Matthew 17: 6 – 8

Although the “face” of our Lord Jesus Christ reveals the loving intention of the Father, we do not have a cozy and comfortable God. God is G – D after all, and falling on our faces *is* an appropriate response.

We have forgotten this, and have tried to domesticate Him. J. B. Phillips, the great Bible translator, was right: Our understanding of God is far “too small.”

As with the children of Israel about to receive the Law, the disciples were terrified. Israel could hear and see God’s greatness. They knew that they were not to even touch the Holy Mountain, let alone approach God. Their fear was so pronounced that they insisted that God only speak through Moses. No doubt, Peter, James and John thought that the judgment of God was about to fall upon them as the voice of God spoke on Mount Tabor.

But our surprising and mysterious God approached them differently. In and through Jesus Christ, the Light of Light<sup>11</sup> and “radiance of the glory,”<sup>12</sup> God approaches *us* differently. Christ, far greater than Moses (*Hebrews* 3 – 4), meets us in our fear. As with his disciples, he touches us and tells us that we do not need to be afraid. God approaches us. The face of God in Christ welcomes us. Fear not.

## **Thirty-Four Rise**

**“But Jesus came and touched them saying, Rise, and have no fear.”**

**- St Matthew 17: 7**

Fear debilitates. It is our choice, inspired by the touch and word of God, which will determine whether we will stay down or rise up. Christ calls us to rise up, embrace our responsibilities and move on.

The vision and the voice of God empower this possibility. There are other visions and voices that occupy our time (money, sex and power immediately come to mind) but, without exception, every option other than God disappoints.

We must be sure, however, that disappointments *will* come. Deep, and at times devastating, disappointments will rock our lives. They are a part of life in a broken world. No one escapes the cumulative results of the Fall.

Vision, Voice and life's vicissitudes all simultaneously exist. Vision, Voice, and vicissitudes are all real. All beckon. What reality will we choose?

The choice of Vision and Voice, the choice to “rise up,” is not denial. We recognize life's hardships, and we grieve. But, while recognizing these realities, we choose the deeper reality, the truer truth. We choose the reality that gives life meaning. Vision and Voice, the revelation of God, call us to move on in hope.

## **Thirty-Five Down**

**“And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” - St Matthew 17: 9**

Vision and Voice not only call us to “rise up,” but also to come down. All of us enjoy the “mountain top” experience. This is normal, and there is nothing wrong with this. The problem is that we often try to maintain or recreate the experience, “build tents,” and perpetually live upon the high places. This is very human, but is not realistic or productive.

Coming down is exactly what we need. We need to live in the real world where real people suffer and bleed. Spiritual growth occurs most often when we are down, and not when we are up. The applications of God’s Voice and Vision are in real life among real people who have real problems. Voice and Vision empower us to help others discern and discover a more liberating perspective.

But in order to help we must descend. We must live in “hell,” amid the debris of life’s many disorders, if we are going to be effective in our lives and in our calling.

And here is the difficulty: *There are many times when we must not tell anyone about what we saw or what God said.* Silence is called for. Discretion is called for. Loving obedience is what is required. We must simply remain silent and serve. We must learn to say little but serve much.

## Thirty-Six Until

**“And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” - St Matthew 17: 9**

God has His time. In the book of *Ecclesiastes* 3: 1, Solomon tells us that “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” After this, the “Preacher,” in verses 2 – 8, provides an exhaustive outline of life-applications.

Timing, as well as place and person, are important. We often do not understand this. More often than not, the “right” time is exactly when “I” want it to be the right time --- as determined by the dictates of impulse. We should be shocked when, examining the gospel narratives, we repeatedly read about Jesus telling people to “tell no one” and finding that his expectation is consistently ignored.

Silence is the expectation imposed upon Peter, James and John. Our Lord tells the disciples that this silence must be observed *until* the Son of Man is resurrected from the dead. Apparently the significance of the Transfiguration could not be understood and apprehended apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We must observe similar cautions. There are many times, especially when afforded the privilege of a sound theological education, when our knowledge *far* outstrips our wisdom. This is dangerous. In such situations, and there are many, when the wisdom of silence is needed ---- at least “until.” But “until” when? Until the cross *and* the resurrection are part of our lives. Until tragedy *and* triumph find a true place within us.

**Thirty-Seven**  
**“And They Could Not”**

**“Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit...So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”** - St. Mark 9: 14 – 18

**“...and they could not...”** - St. Matthew 17: 16

This reference from St. Mark’s post-Transfiguration account precisely illustrates how our knowledge can outstrip both our wisdom and our abilities. The disciples “knew,” but they did not really understand or believe. The Transfiguration experience – at this time – did not result in effective ministry. They could not. They were not able.

There are many times when we cannot and are unable. Although there may be many reasons for our incapacities, on many occasions our lack of ability reflects a lack of faith and not, necessarily, a lack of having an *experience* of God.

And we *do* love our experiences! In fact, at least in the United States, experience is a defining feature of our culture. It is a feature that has infected the Church. Churches, large and small, cater to helping people experience worship. The emotional high, not God, is what we seek. We have become manufacturers and not messengers. Whether it is Game Shows or it is Worship Services, experience rules.

And this is the point. There is nothing wrong with experience. Experiences can be quite pleasant. Experience can inform our faith. However, our elevation of experience suggests a dangerous turn in thinking, theology and life: *If we do not feel it, we do not do it*. When feelings dictate, faith and obedience are compromised. The disciples had the *experience*, but they “could not.” Why? Experience does not imply effectiveness.

## **Thirty-Eight Faithless**

**“And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.”**

**- St. Matthew 17: 17**

Like the disciples, we are at times “faithless.” Having experienced the saving work of God, and having seen many mighty acts and events, the disciples were slow to understand and believe. They “saw,” they “experienced,” and they were faithless.

This seems rather odd. Had they not just descended from Mount Tabor with the knowledge and experience of the Transfigured Christ? Had they not just seen our Lord elevated high above both the Law and the Prophets? Were the disciples not just commanded to hear ----- and, of course, heed the Voice and the Vision?

What went wrong?

Our text does not specifically provide us with an answer. Elsewhere, we read that our Lord emphasized fasting and prayer as an antidote for the disciple’s inability. In other biblical texts we are told that the disciples were a bit “slow” and that they had failed to believe what Holy Scriptures had revealed. Even after the resurrection, and the testimony of some of their company, the disciples did not believe. Like Thomas, they all wanted to “see it to believe it.” How very modern and “scientific” of them.

How very much like each one of us. *Unless we see, we refuse* to believe.

Faith is essentially a choice. Visions and voices and revelations and insights and feelings will all come and go. What remains are choices regarding belief and behavior. “Proof” provides little because, in the end, we will always make a choice to believe or to doubt.

## **Thirty-Nine Bring**

**“And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.”**

- St. Matthew 17: 17

In spite of the disciple’s failures, and regardless of the pronounced doubt among the general population, our Lord’s attitude was welcoming. “Bring him here to me,” Jesus said. In other Gospel passages, Jesus says “come.” Jesus’ response to our sin, failures, shortcomings and doubts is for us to *come* to him and to *bring* our needs.

This does not mean that there won’t be times when we will not receive a sharp rebuke. The passage quoted above suggests that our Lord himself at times expressed a pronounced amount of holy frustration. It is almost as if he was rhetorically asking them, and of course each one of us, how much do we have to see and experience before we believe? Hadn’t the disciples seen enough miracles? Wasn’t the Transfiguration enough? How much is enough? Will the resurrection be enough? Will Christ’s “riding up the Heavenly Way” produce faith and obedience? <sup>13</sup> A round rebuke was required.

But this was not a retort that discouraged. Like a good surgeon who exposes and cleanses a festering wound, this retort encouraged and healed. How “precious” are the “wounds” of Christ our faithful friend!

Our lack of faith is a festering wound. Jesus rebukes our lack of faith. And yet, regardless of this, Jesus commands us to come to him and bring all of who we are to him. Come. Bring. Believe. Be healed.

## **Forty Healed**

**“And Jesus rebuked the demon...and the boy was healed instantly.”**

– **St. Matthew 17: 18**

Jesus beckons us to “come,” and to “bring” everything we are and have to him. We are called to ascend with him up Mount Tabor, and to watch, pray, see and hear. God continues to call, and He wants us to know the transformative impact of seeing Him as He is --- revealed to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus also tells us that we must come down. The Christian life embraces both the “highs” and the “lows” of human existence. In fact, living the ascended life is to live the descended life. The first of the Beatitudes in *St. Matthew 5* makes this clear. Poverty of spirit is the perpetual path of blessedness. We must descend. And, by God’s grace and abundant mercy, we must continue to descend. The path from “glory to glory” is paved with holy humiliation.

Saints always have dirt under their fingernails. The disciples, after their descent from Mount Tabor, were once again faced with the real world and real problems. They were challenged not only by a man who was so very disappointed (and possibly angry), but also by their own failure. They feasted upon the heavenly Voice and Vision, they had tasted of the Kingdom, but they had nothing to offer the needy and the broken. They needed to come down.

There is a very fine kernel of good news here, enough to plant a field that will be ripe for harvest. The good news is this: When we fail, God continues to work. And, as God continues to work, we will see him more clearly and we will be changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Andreopoulos *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, New York, 2005: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) 15

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI *The Fathers* (Huntington, Indiana, 2008: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division) 87

<sup>3</sup> Donald P. Richmond *Suffering: Job's Very Human Path to Holiness* (Missionary Society of St. Jude) and *A Short Season in Hell: Meditations on Dante*

<sup>4</sup> John Stott *Sermon on the Mount: 12 Studies for Individuals or Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 56 - 57

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Webber *Learning to Worship with All Your Heart: A Study in the Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1996: Hendrickson Publishers) 2 - 5

<sup>6</sup> Larry Crabb, Ph.D., a respected Christian Psychologist and Spiritual Director, coined this phrase.

<sup>7</sup> See Ernest Becker's insightful book, *The Denial of Death*.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Schmemmann *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann: 1973 – 1983* (Crestwood, New York, 2002: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) 109

<sup>9</sup> Andreopoulos, referenced above, compares St. Peter's insistence on building "tents" with the Feast of Booths.

<sup>10</sup> It is to be noted, in 2 Chronicles 5: 12 – 14, that the cloud of God's presence *stopped* the priests from serving because the cloud of presence obscured their vision. The application of this is critical: *In God's presence there is Sabbath*. The Vision of God leads to the Sabbath of God,

<sup>11</sup> Nicene Creed

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 1: 3

<sup>13</sup> From St. Patrick's Breastplate as found in Esther De Waal's *A World Made Whole* (London, 1991: Fount Paperbacks: an imprint of Harper/Collins Publishers) 112

The author wants to acknowledge and thank *Anglicans for Renewal, Canada*, who graciously released some of these meditations in their journal and allowed them to be released elsewhere in their entirety.

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