

Historic Commentary

(Transfiguration Sunday - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 9:2-9 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 9](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Origen](#): In six days (the very number denoting perfect fulfillment) the whole world, this perfect work of art, was made. But there is One who transcends all the things of the world, all that belongs to the "six days." Being eternal, this One beholds not only what is seen in time, but what is not seen and is eternal. If therefore any one of us wishes to be taken by Jesus, and led up by him into the high mountain, and be deemed worthy to witness his transfiguration apart, let him pass beyond the six days, because he no longer beholds the things which are seen, nor longer loves the world, nor the things in the world.

[Augustine](#): Leaving out of their calculation the day on which Jesus spoke these words, and the day on which he exhibited that memorable spectacle on the mount, they have regarded simply the intermediate days, and have used the expression, "after six days." But Luke, reckoning in the extreme day at either end, that is to say, the first day and the last day, has made it "after eight days," in accordance with that mode of speech in which the part is put for the whole.

[Ephrem the Syrian](#):

The Lord who is beyond measure
measures out nourishment to all,
adapting to our eyes the sight of himself,
to our hearing his voice,
His blessing to our appetite,
His wisdom to our tongue.

[Chrysostom](#): He disclosed, it is said, a glimpse of the Godhead. He manifested to them the God who was dwelling among them.

Origen: But when he is transfigured, his face also shines as the sun that he may be manifested to the children of light who have put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, and are no longer the children of darkness or night but have become the sons of day, and walk honestly as in the day. Being manifested, he will shine unto them not simply as the sun, but as demonstrated to be the sun of righteousness.

Augustine: What this sun is to the eyes of the flesh, that is the Lord to the eyes of the heart.

Chrysostom: How did he shine? Tell me. Exceedingly. And how do you express this? He shone as the sun. As the sun, you say? Yes. Why the sun? Because I do not know any other luminary more brilliant. And he was white, you say, as snow? Why as snow? Because I do not know any other substance which is whiter. But he did not strictly speaking shine merely as the sun shines daily. This is proved by what follows: the disciples fell to the ground. If he had shone as the sun daily shines, the disciples would not have fallen, for they saw the sun every day, and did not fall. But inasmuch as he shone more brilliantly than the sun or snow, they, being unable to bear the splendor, fell to the earth.

Venerable Bede: If anyone asks what the Lord's garments, which became white as snow, represent typologically, we can properly understand them as pointing to the church of his saints [who] ... at the time of the resurrection will be purified from every blemish of iniquity and at the same time from all the darkness of mortality. Concerning the Lord's garments the Evangelist Mark remarks that "they became as bright as snow, such as no bleacher on earth can make them white." It is evident to everyone that there is no one who can live on earth without corruption and sorrow. So it is evident to all who are wise, although heretics deny it, that there is no one who can live on earth without being touched by some sin. But what a cleansing agent (that is, a teacher of souls or some extraordinary purifier of his body) cannot do on earth, that the Lord will do in heaven. He will purify the church, which is his clothing, "from all defilement of flesh and spirit," renewing [her] besides with eternal blessedness and light of flesh and spirit.

Chrysostom: For both the one and the other had courageously withstood a tyrant: one the Egyptian, the other Ahab; and this on behalf of a people who were both ungrateful and disobedient.... And both were simple unlearned men. One was slow of speech and weak of voice. The other a rough countryman. And both were men who had despised the riches of this world. For Moses possessed nothing. And Elijah had nothing but his sheepskin.

Venerable Bede: Moses and Elijah, who talked with the Lord on the mountain, and spoke about his passion and resurrection, represent the oracles of the law and prophets which were fulfilled in the Lord.... The figures of Moses and Elijah embrace all who are finally to reign with the Lord. By Moses, who died and was buried, we can understand those who at the judgment are going to be raised up from death.³⁴ By Elijah, on the other hand, who has not yet paid the debt of death, we understand those who are going to be found alive in the flesh at the judge's coming.

Jerome: O Peter, even though you have ascended the mountain, even though you see Jesus transfigured, even though his garments are white; nevertheless, because Christ has not yet suffered for you, you are still unable to know the truth.

Jerome: It seems to me that this cloud is the grace of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, a tent gives shelter and overshadows those who are within; the cloud, therefore, serves the purpose of the tents. O Peter, you who want to set up three tents, have regard for the one tent of the Holy Spirit who shelters us equally.

Ambrose: In his baptism he identified him, saying: “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” He declared him on the mount, saying: “This is my beloved Son, hear him.” He declared him in his passion, when the sun hid itself, and sea and earth trembled. He declared him in the centurion, who said: “Truly this was the Son of God.”

Jerome: Do not set up tents equally for the Lord and his servants. “This is my beloved Son; hear him,” my Son, not Moses or Elijah. They are servants; this is the Son. This is my Son, of my nature, of my substance, abiding in me, and he is all that I am. This is my beloved Son. They, too, indeed are dear to me, but he is my beloved; hear him, therefore. They proclaim and teach him, but you, hear him. He is the Lord and master, they are companions in service. Moses and Elijah speak of Christ; they are your fellow servants. He is the Lord; hear him.

Augustine: Moses was there, and Elijah. The voice did not say: These are my beloved sons. For One only is the Son; others are adopted. It is he that is commended to them: He from whom the law and prophets derive their glory.

Chrysostom: So He bound them to silence. Furthermore he spoke of his passion as though it were the reason why he asked them to be silent. Note that he did not tell them that they must never tell this to anyone. Instead they should not tell it until he had risen from the dead. In this respect he was silent as to what was painful, and spoke only of what was joyful.

John Calvin:

Matthew 17:1. And after six days.

We must first inquire for what purpose Christ clothed himself with heavenly glory for a short time, and why he did not admit more than three of his disciples to be spectators. Some think that he did so, in order to fortify them against the trial which they were soon to meet with, arising from his death. That does not appear to me to be a probable reason; for why should he have deprived the rest of the same remedy, or rather, why does he expressly forbid them to make known what they had seen till after his resurrection, but because the result of the vision would be later than his death? I have no doubt whatever that Christ intended to show that he was not dragged unwillingly to death, but that he came forward of his own accord, to offer to the Father the sacrifice of obedience. The disciples were not made aware of this till Christ rose; nor was it even necessary that, at the very moment of his death, they should perceive the divine power of Christ, so as to acknowledge it to be victorious on the cross; but the instruction which they now received

was intended to be useful at a future period both to themselves and to us, that no man might take offense at the weakness of Christ, as if it were by force and necessity that he had suffered. It would manifestly have been quite as easy for Christ to protect his body from death as to clothe it with heavenly glory.

We are thus taught that he was subjected to death, because he wished it to be so; that he was crucified, because he offered himself. That same flesh, which was sacrificed on the cross and lay in the grave, might have been exempted from death and the grave; for it had already partaken of the heavenly glory. We are also taught that, so long as Christ remained in the world, bearing the form of a servant, and so long as his majesty was concealed under the weakness of the flesh, nothing had been taken from him, for it was of his own accord that he emptied himself, (Philippians 2:7;) but now his resurrection has drawn aside that veil by which his power had been concealed for a time. Our Lord reckoned it enough to select three witnesses, because that is the number which the Law has laid down for proving anything; at the mouth of two witnesses or three witnesses, (Deuteronomy 17:6.). The difference as to time ought not to give us uneasiness. Matthew and Mark reckon six entire days, which had elapsed between the events. Luke says that it happened about eight days afterwards, including both the day on which Christ spake these words, and the day on which he was transfigured. We see then that, under a diversity of expression, there is a perfect agreement as to the meaning.

2. And was transfigured before them.

Luke says that this happened while he was praying; and from the circumstances of time and place, we may infer that he had prayed for what he now obtained, that in the brightness of an unusual form his Godhead might become visible; not that he needed to ask by prayer from another what he did not possess, or that he doubted his Father's willingness, but because, during the whole course of his humiliation, he always ascribed to the Father whatever he did as a divine Person, and because he intended to excite us to prayer by his example.

His transfiguration did not altogether enable his disciples to see Christ, as he now is in heaven, but gave them a taste of his boundless glory, such as they were able to comprehend. Then his face shone as the sun; but now he is far beyond the sun in brightness. In his raiment an unusual and dazzling whiteness appeared; but now without raiment a divine majesty shines in his whole body. Thus in ancient times God appeared to the holy fathers, not as He was in Himself, but so far as they could endure the rays of His infinite brightness; for John declares that not until they are like him will they see him as he is, (1 John 3:2.). There is no necessity for entering here into ingenious inquiries as to the whiteness of his garments, or the brightness of his countenance; for this was not a complete exhibition of the heavenly glory of Christ, but, under symbols which were adapted to the capacity of the flesh, he enabled them to taste in part what could not be fully comprehended.

3. And, lo, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah.

It is asked, Were Moses and Elijah actually present? or was it only an apparition that was exhibited to the disciples, as the prophets frequently beheld visions of things that were absent? Though the subject admits, as we say, of arguments on both sides, yet I think it more probable that they were actually brought to that place. There is no absurdity in this supposition; for God has bodies and souls in his hand, and can restore the dead to life at his pleasure, whenever he sees it to be necessary. Moses and Elijah did not then rise on their own account, but in order to wait upon Christ. It will next be asked, How came the apostles to know Moses and Elijah, whom they had never seen? The answer is easy. God, who brought them forward, gave also signs and tokens by which they were enabled to know them. It was thus by an extraordinary revelation that they obtained the certain knowledge that they were Moses and Elijah. But why did these two appear rather than others who equally belonged to the company of the holy fathers? It was intended to demonstrate that Christ alone is the end of the Law and of the Prophets; and that single reason ought to satisfy us: for it was of the utmost importance to our faith that Christ did not come into our world without a testimony, but with commendations which God had formerly bestowed. I have no objection, however, to the reason which is commonly adduced, that Elijah was selected, in preference to others, as the representative of all the Prophets; because, though he left nothing in writing, yet next to Moses he was the most distinguished of their number, restored the worship of God which had been corrupted, and stood unrivaled in his exertions for vindicating the Law and true godliness, which was at that time almost extinct.

And they conversed with Jesus.

When they appeared along with Christ, and held conversation with him, this was a declaration of their being agreed. The subject on which they conversed is stated by Luke only: they talked of the decease which awaited Christ at Jerusalem. This must not be understood to refer to them as private individuals, but rather to the commission which they had formerly received. Though it was now a long time since they had died and finished the course of their calling, yet our Lord intended once more to ratify by their voice what they had taught during their life, in order to inform us that the same salvation, through the sacrifice of Christ, is held out to us in common with the holy fathers. At the time when the ancient prophets uttered their predictions concerning the death of Christ, he himself, who was the eternal wisdom of God, was sitting on the invisible throne of his glory. Hence it follows that, when he was clothed in flesh, he was not liable to death any farther than as he submitted to it of his own free will.

4. Lord, it is good for us to be here.

Luke tells us that Peter uttered these words while Moses and Elijah were departing; and hence we infer that he was afraid lest, at their departure, that pleasant and delightful exhibition should vanish away. We need not wonder that Peter was so captivated by the loveliness of what he beheld, as to lose sight of every other person, and rest satisfied with the mere enjoyment of it; as it is said in the psalm, In thy presence is fullness of joy, (Psalm 16:11.) But his desire was foolish; first, because he did not comprehend the design of the vision; secondly, because he absurdly put the servants on a level with their Lord;

and, thirdly, he was mistaken in proposing to build fading tabernacles for men who had been already admitted to the glory of heaven and of the angels.

I have said that he did not understand the design of the vision; for, while he was hearing, from the mouth of Moses and Elijah, that the time of Christ's death was at hand, he foolishly dreamed that his present aspect, which was temporary, would endure forever. And what if the kingdom of Christ had been confined in this way to the narrow limits of twenty or thirty feet? Where would have been the redemption of the whole world? Where would have been the communication of eternal salvation? It was also highly absurd to conceive of Moses and Elijah as companions of the Son of God, as if it had not been proper that all should be reduced to a lower rank, that he alone may have the preeminence. And if Peter is satisfied with his present condition, why does he suppose that earthly supports were needed by those persons, the very sight of whom, he imagined, was enough to make him happy?

Justly, therefore, is it stated by two of the Evangelists, that he knew not what he said; and Mark assigns the reason, that they were afraid; for God did not intend that the apostles should, at that time, derive any advantage from it beyond that of beholding for a moment, as in a bright mirror, the divinity of his Son. At a later period, he pointed out to them the fruit of the vision, and corrected the error of their judgment. What is stated by Mark must therefore mean, that Peter was carried away by frenzy, and spoke like a man who had lost his senses.

5. Lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them.

Their eyes were covered by a cloud, in order to inform them, that they were not yet prepared for beholding the brightness of the heavenly glory. For, when the Lord gave tokens of his presence, he employed, at the same time, some coverings to restrain the arrogance of the human mind. So now, with the view of teaching his disciples a lesson of humility, he withdraws from their eyes the sight of the heavenly glory. This admonition is likewise addressed to us, that we may not seek to pry into the secrets which lie beyond our senses, but, on the contrary, that every man may keep within the limits of sobriety, according to the measure of his faith. In a word, this cloud ought to serve us as a bridle, that our curiosity may not indulge in undue wantonness. The disciples, too, were warned that they must return to their former warfare, and therefore must not expect a triumph before the time.

And, lo, a voice from the cloud.

It deserves our attention, that the voice of God was heard from the cloud, but that neither a body nor a face was seen. Let us therefore remember the warning which Moses gives us, that God has no visible shape, lest we should deceive ourselves by imagining that He resembled a man, (Deuteronomy 4:15.) There were, no doubt, various appearances under which God made himself known to the holy fathers in ancient times; but in all cases he refrained from using signs which might induce them to make for themselves idols. And certainly, as the minds of men are too strongly inclined to foolish imaginations, there was no necessity for throwing oil upon the flame. This manifestation of the glory of God was remarkable above all others. When he makes a cloud to pass between Him and us, and

invites us to himself by His voice, what madness is it to attempt to place Him before our eyes by a block of wood or of stone? Let us therefore endeavor to enter by faith alone, and not by the eyes of flesh, into that inaccessible light in which God dwells. The voice came from the cloud, that the disciples, knowing it to have proceeded from God, might receive it with due reverence.

This is my beloved Son.

I willingly concur with those who think that there is an implied contrast of Moses and Elijah with Christ, and that the disciples of God's own Son are here charged to seek no other teacher. The word Son is emphatic, and raises him above servants. There are two titles here bestowed upon Christ, which are not more fitted to do honor to him than to aid our faith: a beloved Son, and a Master. The Father calls him my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, and thus declares him to be the Mediator, by whom he reconciles the world to himself. When he enjoins us to hear him, he appoints him to be the supreme and only teacher of his Church. It was his design to distinguish Christ from all the rest, as we truly and strictly infer from those words, that by nature he was God's only Son. In like manner, we learn that he alone is beloved by the Father, and that he alone is appointed to be our Teacher, that in him all authority may dwell.

But it will perhaps be objected, Does not God love angels and men? It is easy to reply, that the fatherly love of God, which is spread over angels and men, proceeds from him as its source. The Son is beloved by the Father, not so as to make other creatures the objects of his hatred, but so that he communicates to them what belongs to himself. There is a difference, no doubt, between our condition and that of the angels; for they never were alienated from God, and therefore needed not that he should reconcile them; while we are enemies on account of sin, till Christ procure for us his favor. Still, it is a fixed principle that God is gracious to both, only so far as he embraces us in Christ; for even the angels would not be firmly united to God if Christ were not their Head. It may also be observed that, since the Father here speaks of himself as different from the Son, there is a distinction of persons; for they are one in essence and alike in glory.

Hear him.

I mentioned a little ago, that these words were intended to draw the attention of the Church to Christ as the only Teacher, that on his mouth alone it may depend. For, though Christ came to maintain the authority of the Law and the Prophets, (Matthew 5:17,) yet he holds the highest rank, so that, by the brightness of his gospel, he causes those sparks which shone in the Old Testament to disappear. He is the Sun of righteousness, whose arrival brought the full light of day. And this is the reason why the Apostle says (Hebrews 1:1) that God, who at sundry times and in various ways spoke formerly by the Prophets, hath in these last days spoken to us by his beloved Son.

In short, Christ is as truly heard at the present day in the Law and in the Prophets as in his Gospel; so that in him dwells the authority of a Master, which he claims for himself alone, saying, One is your Master, even Christ, (Matthew 23:8.) But his authority is not fully acknowledged, unless all the tongues of men are silent. If we would submit to his doctrine, all that has been invented by men must be thrown down and destroyed. He is

every day, no doubt, sending out teachers, but it is to state purely and honestly what they have learned from him, and not to corrupt the gospel by their own additions. In a word, no man can be regarded a faithful teacher of the Church, unless he be himself a disciple of Christ, and bring others to be taught by him.

6. And having heard this

God intended that the disciples should be struck with this terror, in order to impress more fully on their hearts the remembrance of the vision. Yet we see how great is the weakness of our nature, which trembles in this manner at hearing the voice of God. If ungodly men mock at God, or despise him without concern, it is because God does not address them so as to cause his presence to be felt; but the majesty of God, as soon as we perceive him, must unavoidably cast us down.

7. Then Jesus approaching touched them.

Christ raises them up when they had fallen, and by so doing performs his office; for he came down to us for this very purpose, that by his guidance believers might boldly enter into the presence of God, and that his majesty, which otherwise would swallow up all flesh, might no longer fill them with terror. Nor is it only by his words that he comforts, but by touching also that he encourages them.

8. They saw no man but Jesus only.

When it is said that in the end they saw Christ alone, this means that the Law and the Prophets had a temporary glory, that Christ alone might remain fully in view. If we would properly avail ourselves of the aid of Moses, we must not stop with him, but must endeavor to be conducted by his hand to Christ, of whom both he and all the rest are ministers. This passage may also be applied to condemn the superstitions of those who confound Christ not only with prophets and apostles, but with saints of the lowest rank, in such a manner as to make him nothing more than one of their number. But when the saints of God are eminent in graces, it is for a totally different purpose than that they should defraud Christ of a part of his honor, and appropriate it to themselves. In the disciples themselves we may see the origin of the mistake; for so long as they were terrified by the majesty of God, their minds wandered in search of men, but when Christ gently raised them up, they saw him alone. If we are made to experience that consolation by which Christ relieves us of our fears, all those foolish affections, which distract us on every hand, will vanish away.