

## **Jesus' Transfiguration**

By Bishop George Khodr

The event which we celebrate today, the transfiguration of Christ, is essential in the Gospel. Before it, in it and after it the atmosphere is pain and resurrection. After Peter's confession concerning Jesus' sonship to God, "from that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ... and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Matt. 16: 21)

Peter's confession was in the area of Caesarea Philippi, which is currently called Banias, and is located on the foot of Mount Hermon or *Jabal al-Shaikh*. After six days of this confession the Lord took Peter, Jacob and John, who were His close companions, to a high mountain [Matt. 17: 1-2]. The tradition tells that it is Tabor in Galilee; however Tabor is not a high mountain. Thus, some scholars are inclined to say that the Lord has not left the region of Banias and that transfiguration has occurred on Mount Hermon. This is of no importance for the teaching. There He has been transfigured and His form was changed as it says in Greek. What does it mean that His face shone like the sun and His garments became white as light? Here comes the teaching of the Orthodox Church, as it reads the text. The event took place in the day time, however this was not the light of the sun, since this would not be different [than the regular light] and there would not be any wondrous element to be mentioned. However, it was the light of Godhead, which Jesus was concealing in His body and it has radiated in order to foretell His resurrection. Thus, this is kind of anticipation of the salvation events.

Just after this we read that Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus and talk to Him. Only Luke says that they "appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem." [Luke 9: 31] And the departure refers to the sufferings.

As the two prophets were on the mountain with Jesus, a bright cloud overshadowed them. And if we read this word with the Old Testament background we come to understand that the cloud is referring to *Shekinah* [Hebrew word] and the Arabic is *Sakinah* which means serenity, designating the divine presence. From this cloud of glory a voice was heard: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." [Matt. 17: 5] The part before "listen to him" has been mentioned in the baptism of the Lord, which conceptually anticipates the suffering and the resurrection of the Savior. Is transfiguration then an image of the baptism and the heard voice is the same one heard at the Jordan River? This, in terms of the narrative, is a critical question which I cannot answer. However, as critics we may say that the content of baptism and of transfiguration is one, and that the whole question from the beginning to the end is about the crucifixion of the Master and

His rising from the dead. In the baptism we are transfigured, that is we acquire a new form, which the Creator has prepared it for us from eternity.

Coming back to Elijah and Moses, the traditional thought has perceived Elijah as a prototype for the prophets, who come to tell that all prophecies are realized in the death of the Lord, and perceives Moses as the one by whom the law of obligations will come to an end, whenever he meets Jesus the Nazarene. They were present in the cloud of glory which has been declared first through Jesus Christ, while they were not in the glory before that, as the Lord has said: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." (John 1: 18) However, the statement "listen to him", which is not mentioned in the narrative of the baptism, calls us to listen to the transfigured Christ, who is anterior to us, whenever we become from the adherents [of Christ], staring only at Him, through His grace and our humility. Elijah, Moses and all the prophets, who preceded the Master in time, would not bring us other than to Him. We accept them since they brought the old humanity to Him. And we accept the thought that harks to Jesus and the philosophy which serves Him, and the art which discloses Him in one way or another. He alone remains and He does not abolish [others], since all truth and sublimity comes from His transfiguration, namely, from the radiation of that Godhead, which He carries, to the whole scope of life.

Elijah and Moses did not see God in the Old Testament. No one can "see [God] and live" [Ex. 33: 20]. No one penetrates the essence of God. Since then, he/[she] would become God, in his/[her] essence. Nevertheless, God is light that has to be attainable. "God became man so that man might become a god." [St. Athanasius, De inc. 54, 3] Since Irenaeus, in the second century, this has been said, and it was affirmed by Athanasius in the fourth century, Basil has confirmed it, Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century has taught it, and the Christian East has verified it in a council.

In one way or another all of them have maintained that there are in God eternal powers, which are not God's essence, however they are uncreated powers. Since whenever God offers you temporal powers, namely powers that are created in time, they would not be God or they would not arrive at God. God provides you with works which are God's, and they were eternally with God, and whenever you receive them you rise to eternity and you become as having no beginning.

If grace was created, then it would be exterior to God, namely it would not deify you. What does it mean that grace sanctifies you? What does it mean that you become perfect through sanctification, if sanctification was something that God throws within you while it is not of Godself?

The incarnation of the Son of God implies that He has bridged the gap between the Creator and the creature, without God becoming a creature in essence, or the creature a Creator in essence. However, they become one through

sanctification and they meet in eternity. In eternal life, which has been accomplished through resurrection, you are not merely behind God, but you are in God. You walk in God toward God's unending reality and toward your unending reality through the consolidation of love.

However, you would not reach at this resurrection without you being crucified with Christ, so that you would be purified from the defilements of this world. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" [Matt. 16: 24], so that he/[she] might throw away every corruptive lust and choose Christ alone. That is why when Moses and Elijah have disappeared from the mountain the disciples could not see other than Jesus.

Every one of us may resemble Christ that is by crucifying one's sins every day, so that one might rise every day. Through such resembling one might become a partner of Christ, namely one with Him in love, which is not mixed with hypocrisy, as though he/[she] is sitting with Him on the right side of God.

That person would coexist with all people, would perform any profession and would love the things of this world, without being subject to them. However, in each fold of his/[her] inner existence he/[she] would be with Christ or from Christ until he/[she] reigns with Christ at the resurrection when God becomes all in all.