

Transfiguration Celebration

The Feast of the Holy Transfiguration is celebrated late in summer at the time of the harvest of the first fruits. To express our recognition and gratitude to God for His generosity, we bring some of these first fruits to church for blessing. This tradition finds its roots in the Old Testament. In Exodus (23:19) God orders the Israelites, "You must bring the best of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord, your God."

The tradition is also found in the writings of the early Church Fathers. St. Gregory of Nazianz (who died in 389) calls the blessing of fruits in church a "just and holy" custom. This Christian custom dates to Apostolic times. St. Hippolytus composed a prayer of thanksgiving for the new fruits. In this prayer, written around 220 AD, he mentions grapes, figs, pomegranates, pears, mulberries, peaches, and almonds. In Subcarpathia (the land of our ancestors) the fruits of the season were apples, plums and pears.

The Sixth Ecumenical Council, celebrated in Constantinople (680 to 681 AD) prescribed that the new "wheat and grapes" were to be blessed in church on the Feast of Holy Transfiguration (Canon 28). Some older books of blessing forbade the faithful to eat new fruits of the season before they had been blessed in church.

On the Feast of the Transfiguration the Church blesses the first fruits of the harvest both as a giving back to the Lord what is His and has come from Him (1 Chronicles 29:14) and as a celebration of the final transfiguration of all things in Christ. The Divine Light glimpsed by the Apostles on Mount Tabor will transform all creation to its most perfect flowering and fruitfulness. The blessing of grapes, as well as other fruits on this day is the most beautiful and adequate sign of the final transfiguration of all things in Christ. It signifies the ultimate flowering and fruitfulness of all creation in the paradise of God's unending Kingdom of Life when all will be transformed by the glory of the Lord.

The preparation of the fruits we bring for blessing should be a family event – not an afterthought. We share this fruit with one another and thank God for His blessings.

Prayer for the Blessing of Fruits

O Lord our God Jesus Christ, You said to Your disciples: "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you shall receive, and it will come to you," we humbly beseech You, bless and sanctify the fruits which Your faithful servants have brought today to Your Church. May these fruits when eaten preserve the life and health of all those present here, as well as of those absent. May these blessed fruits be an effective medicine for those who are sick and ailing, and may they be a protection against the assaults of the enemy for those who keep them in their homes; and may those who partake of them enjoy the fullness of Your goodness and blessing. For You are the God of peace, love and mercy, O Lover of mankind, and we render glory to You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Feast of the Transfiguration

We read the story of the Transfiguration of Christ recounted in detail in three of the four Gospels, Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:1-7; Luke 9:28-36. St. Peter recalls the event which he witnessed with St. James and St. John in his Epistle 2 Peter 1:16-18 "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eye-witnesses of His majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to Him by the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with Whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with Him on the holy mountain."

"For us the Transfiguration is, and will always remain, heaven's testimony to Christ's divinity ... Jesus passed His life on earth as a poor, ordinary, simple Jew. But at the Transfiguration, He threw off the dark mantle of humanity and revealed Himself in full divine splendor ... what once happened during the night on Mount Tabor happens again every time the Holy Sacrifice is offered. We may see only the simple appearance upon the altar, but with the eyes of faith we behold the glorified Christ; we see, in fact, the King of Glory with His court, the saints of the Old and New Covenant. Liturgy actualizes in our very presence the sanctifying act of Christ at His Transfiguration ... The purpose of liturgy is the divine transfiguration of the participants." (Excerpts from *With Christ Through the Year: The Liturgical Year through Word and Symbols* by Rev. Bernard Strasser, OSB, 1947)

The event of the Transfiguration came at a critical point in the ministry of Jesus, just as He was setting out on His journey to Jerusalem, where He would experience humiliation, suffering and death on the cross. The Transfiguration gave Peter, James and John a glimpse of Jesus' glory and ultimately the glory which we will all share in. It was meant to strengthen the three men, and us, for the suffering of the cross.

Jesus had spent three years teaching and preparing the Apostles and they were now approaching the final events of Jesus' earthy life and His mission of salvation.

To appreciate the Transfiguration of Christ as one of the central events recorded in the Gospel we have to consider how it fits in the chronology of the ministry of Jesus.

In Matthew 16, the Pharisees and Saducees came to test Jesus. They asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. Jesus responded that no sign would be given except the sign of Jonah (Who had spent three days in the belly of the whale; prefiguring the three days Jesus spent in the tomb.) and then He and the disciples left them.

Jesus then asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples responded, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus then turned to His inner circle, the twelve, and asked, "But who do YOU say I am?" Peter alone spoke, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Peter knew that Jesus was more than a prophet. Jesus responded to him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven ... on this rock I will build my Church. Only Peter had received this gift of knowledge, a special charism from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus then began to tell the Disciples about His pending passion and death. This announcement was met with indignation by the Disciples. After spending three years with Jesus, seeing His miracles and performing miracles in His name; when Jesus began to talk about dying they began to wonder if He was the Messiah.

Jesus then took Peter, James and John on to a high mountain apart from the other Apostles. Jesus asked them to pray and they fell asleep. When they woke up they see Jesus standing before them with an indescribable manifestation of light and glory. They see that Jesus is truly God. At the top of the icon of the Transfiguration we see the title of the icon (on the upper right side of the icon as we look at it we see written in Old Slavonic the Greek word "Metamorphized" which was the word used for transfigured. The caterpillar had become a butterfly. The One who had so carefully veiled His divine glory showed that glory for a brief moment. The purpose was to reinforce the faith of the Apostles. This is exactly what Peter shares in his second letter when he writes, "We did not bring you cunningly devised fables. We know Jesus is the Messiah because we saw His physical glory."

When Jesus and three Apostles returned to the others, they find the other disciples unable to drive a demon out of a man. When Jesus is asked why the exorcism did not work He tells them it was because of their staggering faith. They were not able to accept that Jesus was going to die. The Transfiguration was meant to reveal the Divinity of Jesus and strengthen the Apostles' faith during His passion, death and resurrection.

Why did Jesus single out Peter, James and John to witness this event? James and John were brothers, the sons of Zebedee and Salome. They were fishermen with their father on the lake of Genesareth. They had been disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus first called St. Andrew, then St. Peter and then St. James and St. John. When Jesus called James and John they immediately left all and followed Him.

In addition to the Transfiguration account there were other times in Scripture when Jesus singled out these three.

- Peter, James, and John were the only witnesses to the raising of the Daughter of Jarius (Mk 5:13).
- They witnessed the agony in Gethsemane more closely than the other disciples (Mt 26:37).
- After Jesus' arrest Peter and John followed Him into the palace of the high priest.
- Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the final Passover meal.
- James and John were present when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31).
- After the Ascension and Descent of the Holy Spirit John with Peter took a prominent role in the early days of the Church.
- John is with Peter at the healing of the lame man in the Temple (Acts 3:1).
- He is thrown into prison with Peter (Acts 4:3).
- John accompanies Peter to visit the newly converted Samaria (Acts 8:14).

These three Apostles were special for the following reasons: Peter was chosen to be the first Pope. John is the Beloved Disciple to whom Jesus entrusted His mother. James is the first Apostle to be martyred. He is the only Apostle whose martyrdom is mentioned in Acts. In Acts we learn that King Herod had James killed by the sword. "About that time King Herod laid violent hands on some who belonged to the Church. He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." (Acts 12:1-3) This King Herod is the grandson of King Herod who attempted to murder the child Jesus.

The Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ gives us hope and we look forward to the great and glorious Second Coming of Christ. We await the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God when all creation will be transfigured with the light of Christ.

Jesus Christ is a living, divine person who has accepted a human nature and lived a real human life. This is a matter of historical fact as witnessed in the Scripture. In Jesus Christ God enters the circumstances of our life by becoming human and He does so that humanity might share in the life of God.