

Our Father Among the Saints Gregory Palamas

(c.1297 – reposed 1359)

Archbishop of Thessalonica

Homily XXXIV

On the Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ

*In which it is proved that
the Light of the Transfiguration is Uncreated*

1. WE are filled with praise and wonder when we see this magnificent work of God, the entire visible Creation. The pagan Greek sages also extolled and admired it as they investigated it. But whereas we marvel at it to the glory of the Creator, they did so against His glory, for in their wretchedness they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:25). In the same way, we elucidate the words of the Prophets, Apostles and Fathers for the benefit of those who read them and in honour of the Spirit Who spoke through them. The leaders of any evil heresy also attempt to interpret their writings, but their purpose is to harm their followers and to deny that truth which is in accordance with piety, using the words of the Spirit against the Spirit. The words of the Gospel of grace are lofty and suitable for mature ears and minds, but these words too our God-bearing Fathers softened in their own mouths, making them appropriate for those of us who are less than perfect, just as mothers devoted to their children chew solid food and render it serviceable and easy to take for babies still at the breast. The moisture in their mothers' mouths is nourishment for the children, and the thoughts of our God-bearing Fathers are suitable food for souls that listen and obey. The mouths of

evil, disreputable men, however, are full of deadly poison which, when mixed with the words of life, makes even them lethal for careless listeners.

2. Let us flee from those who reject Patristic interpretations and attempt by themselves to deduce the complete opposite. While pretending to concern themselves with the literal sense of the passage, they reject its godly meaning. We should run away from them more than we would from a snake, for when a snake bites it kills the body temporarily, separating it from the immortal soul, but when these evil men set their teeth into a soul they separate it from God, which is eternal death for that soul. Let us escape as far as we can from such people, and take refuge with those who teach piety and salvation in accordance with the traditions of the Fathers.

3. I have said these things to your charity by way of introduction because today we celebrate the noble Feast of Christ's Transfiguration, and we shall be addressing the subject of the light which shone on that occasion, which is much opposed even in our own day by the enemies of the light. Let us now briefly set out the words of today's Gospel reading from the beginning to unfold the truth. "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James and John, and bringeth them led up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun" (*Mt 17:1-2*). The first thing we should consider in this Gospel passage is from what point in time Matthew, Christ's Apostle and Evangelist, counts the six days preceding the day on which the Lord was transfigured. Six days after which day? Six days after the day when the Lord taught His disciples saying, "The Son of man shall come in the glory of the Father" (*Matt. 16:27*). and adding, "There be some standing here, which shall not taste death, till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom" (*Matt. 16:28*). He was referring to the light of His Transfiguration as His Father's glory and as His own Kingdom. The Evangelist Luke indicates the same sequence of events and expresses it more clearly saying, "And it

came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, He took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening" (*Lk 9:28-29*).

4. But how do the two accounts agree, when one of them speaks definitively about the interval of time as being eight days between the promise and the manifestation, and the other says that it followed after six days? There were eight on the mountain, but they appeared to be six. Three, Peter, James and John, went up with Jesus. There they saw Moses and Elias with Him, talking to Him, making six. However, the Father and the Holy Spirit were invisibly accompanying the Lord. The Father, with His voice testifying that this was His Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit shining forth with Him in the radiant cloud, and showed that the Son was of one nature with the Father and Himself and united in their light. For Their wealth consists in Their oneness of nature and in the unified outburst of their brilliance. So the six persons were eight. Just as there is no contradiction between six and eight in this respect, so there is no disagreement between the Evangelists when Matthew says it was after six days, and Luke that it was about eight days after these sayings. It is as if through these two phrases they present us with a figurative allusion to those visibly gathered on the mountain and those mystically present.

5. Anyone who examines their words closely will see that the Evangelists are in agreement one with another. When Luke spoke of eight days, he is not contradicting Matthew's statement that it was "after six days." But is including the day on which the words were uttered and the day when the Lord was transfigured. Matthew allows those who read intelligently to understand this, because he says "after" to make it clear that he is referring to the following day, whereas Luke leaves the word out. The Evangelist Luke does not say "after eight days" (like the Evangelist Matthew says "after six days"),

but "about eight days passed." So there is no difference in meaning between the Evangelists' account.

6. But where the Evangelists seem to contradict one another, they actually point out to us something great and mysterious. Let those of you who are quick witted pay careful attention to what I am going to say. Why did one Evangelist say "after six days", whereas the other went beyond a week and mentioned the eighth day? Because the great vision of the light of the Lord's Transfiguration is the mystery of the eighth day, that is of the age to come, which is manifested after this world, which was made in six days, has ceased, and the sixfold action of our senses has been transcended. We have five senses, but if you add speech it brings the number of ways in which our senses work to six. The kingdom of God promised to those who are worthy surpasses not only our senses but also our words. The seventh day is honoured with blessed rest from the activities of our sixfold senses, and after this pause, the kingdom of God shines forth on the eighth day, by virtue of a higher energy. It was this power of the divine Spirit, through which those who are worthy will see God's kingdom, that the Lord foretold, according to the divine Luke, when He declared to His disciples, "There be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1; cf. Luke 9:27), bestowing on those who see it the power to behold what is invisible, and purifying them in advance from the deadly, soul-destroying defilement that is sin. The taste of sin is the starting point of all evil thoughts, and those who are cleansed beforehand will not experience the death of the soul, having been preserved undefiled in their minds as well, as I understand it, by the power of the manifestation to come.

7. "There be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:11). The King of all is

everywhere, and so is His Kingdom, so the coming of His kingdom does not mean it arrives from somewhere else, but that it is revealed through the power of the divine Spirit. That is why He said it would come in power. But this power is not for just anyone, but for those who have stood with the Lord, those who have been established in His faith, men like Peter, James and John, who as the Scripture tells us, were first brought up a high mountain, that is to say, above the lowliness of our nature. That is why God is said to be on a mountain, coming down from His heights and leading us up from the depths of our abasement, that He who cannot be contained might, to an extent compatible with our human nature and safety, be contained. This idea is not something inferior to man's mind, but far superior and more exalted than it, being instilled in it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

8. The light of the Lord's Transfiguration does not come into being or cease to be, nor is it circumscribed or perceptible to the senses, even though for a short time on the narrow mountain top it was seen by human eyes. Rather, at that moment the initiated disciples of the Lord 'passed,' as we have been taught, 'from flesh to spirit' by the transformation of their senses, which the Spirit wrought in them, and so they saw that ineffable light, when and as much as the Holy Spirit's power granted them to do so. Those who are not aware of this light and now blaspheme against it think that the chosen Apostles saw the light with their created faculty of sight, and in this way they endeavour to bring down to the level of a created object not just that light—God's power and kingdom—but even the power of the Holy Spirit by which divine things are revealed to the worthy. They have not heard, or have not believed, Paul's words, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us

by His Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

9. When the eighth day came, as we have said, the Lord took Peter and James and John and went up into a mountain to pray” (cf. Luke 9:28). He would always either withdraw from everyone, including the Apostles, to pray alone, as when, having fed the five thousand men along with the women and children, He immediately dismissed them, constrained all the disciples to get into a boat, and went up the mountain to pray (Matt. 14:16-23). Or else He would take a few disciples, those that surpassed the others, with Him. When His saving Passion approached Him He told the other disciples, “Sit ye here, while I go and pray”, but took Peter, James and John with Him (Matt. 26:36-37). Here too He took only those three with Him, “and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them” (Matt. 17: 1-2), that is to say, while they were watching.

10. What do the words “and was transfigured” mean? Chrysostom the Theologian said that the lord graciously willed to open up a little of His divinity, and revealed God within Him to the initiated disciples. “As He prayed,” says Luke, “the fashion of His countenance was altered” (Lk. 9:29), and, as Matthew writes, “His face did shine as the sun” (Mt. 17:12). He compares the light to the sun, not that anyone should imagine that that light was visible to bodily eyes—away with those whose minds are blind and incapable of understanding anything more exalted than visible phenomena!—but that we might know that Christ as God is for those who live by the Spirit and see with spiritual eyes what the sun is for those who live by their senses and see with the natural vision. Those who behold God in divine $\theta\epsilon\omega\upsilon\alpha$ need no other light, for He alone is the light of those who live forever. What need is there for a second light when they have the greatest light of all? Thus while He was praying He became radiant and revealed this

ineffable light in an indescribable way to the chosen disciples in the presence of the most excellent of the prophets, that He might show us that it is prayer which produces this blessed vision, and we might learn that this brilliance comes about and shines forth when we draw near to God with the virtues, and our minds are united with Him. It is given to all who unceasingly reach up towards God by means of perfect works and fervent prayer, and is visible to them. Everything about the blessed divine nature is truly beautiful and desirable, and is visible only to those whose minds have been purified. Anyone who gazes at its brilliant rays and its graces, partakes of it to some extent, as though his own face were touched by dazzling light. That is why Moses' countenance was glorified when he spoke with God (Exodus 34:29).

11. Do you observe that Moses too was glorified when he went up the mountain and beheld the Lord's glory? But although he underwent Transfiguration, he did not bring it about, in accordance with him who said, "The humble light of truth brings me to the point where I see and experience God's radiance" (St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration on the Holy Theophany, that is to say, On the Birth of Our Saviour XXXVII*, 11). Our Lord Jesus Christ, however, possessed that radiance in His own right. He did not need prayer to illuminate His Body with divine light, but He showed how God's splendour would come to the saints and how they would appear. For the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Mt. 13:43). And when they have all become divine light, they will behold, as children of that light, Christ's indescribable divine radiance. The glory that proceeds naturally from His divinity was shown on Tabor to be shared by His Body as well, because of the unity of His hypostasis (St. Gregory is not using the term "divine nature" in any philosophical or technical sense here. The term 'nature' is the divine energies with which we were united in our union with God through the mystery of our Orthodox Baptism, with which we are nourished in the Divine

Mysteries of our Christ's Body and Blood, and in which it is God's good pleasure for us to participate. The use here is the same as in 2 Peter 2:4, "partakers of the divine nature".) Thus His face "did shine as the sun" (Mt. 17:2) on account of this light.

12. There are people in our own times who boast of pagan Greek learning and the wisdom of this world, and who completely disobey spiritual men in matters of the Spirit, and choose to oppose them. When they hear that the light of the Lord's Transfiguration on the mountain was seen by the eyes of the Apostles, they immediately reduce it to visible, created light. They drag down that immaterial, never-setting, pre-eternal light, which surpasses not only our senses but also our minds, because they themselves are at a low level, and are incapable of anything higher than earthly things. Nevertheless, He Who shone with this light proved in advance that it was uncreated (ἄκτιστον) by referring to it as the kingdom of God (cf. Mk. 9:1). God's kingdom is not subservient or created, but uniquely unsubduable and invincible. It is beyond the bounds of both time and age, and cannot be said to have had a beginning or to have been overtaken by time or age. We believe this kingdom to be the inheritance of the saved.

13. Given that when He was transfigured our Lord shone and displayed glory, splendour and light, and will come again as He was seen by His disciples on the mountain, does this mean He somehow took this light to Himself, and will have forever something He did not have before? Perish the blasphemous thought! Because anyone who says so imagines that Christ has three natures: the divine the human and this light. It follows that He did not manifest a radiance other than that which He already had invisibly. He possessed the splendour of the divine nature hidden under His flesh. This light, then, is the light of the Godhead and it is uncreated. According to the theologians, when Christ was transfigured He neither received anything different,

nor was changed into anything different, but was revealed to His disciples as He was, opening their eyes and giving sight to the blind. Take note that eyes with natural vision are blind to that light. It is invisible, and those who behold it do so not simply with their bodily eyes, but with eyes transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

14. The Apostles were transformed, therefore, and saw that transformation which our human clay had undergone, not at that time, but from the moment in which it had been assumed, when it was deified through union with the Word of God. That is why the Virgin, who mysteriously conceived and bore Him, recognized her Child as God incarnate, as did Simeon, when he took Him up in his arms as an infant, and the aged Anna, who came to meet Him (Lk. 2:25ff). The power of God shone out visibly as if through thin glass to people who had the eyes of their heart purified.

15. Why does He take the leaders, and them alone, and go up with them? Obviously, to show them something great and mysterious. But how could the vision of ordinary light, visible to those chosen before they ascended, as well as to those left below, be a great mystery? Why would they need strengthening by the Spirit, and why would their eyes have to be assisted and changed by the Spirit to see such light, if it were visible and created? How could ordinary light be the glory and the kingdom of the Father and the Spirit? How could Christ come in that sort of glory and kingdom in the age to come, when there will be no need for air, light, place or anything of that sort, but God, according to the Apostle, will be everything for us? (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). Clearly if He will be everything for us, He will be our light. Again this demonstrates that this light is the light of the Godhead. Because John, the greatest Theologian among the Evangelists, shows in the Revelation that the everlasting future “city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Rev. 21:23). Surely here he is pointing us towards Jesus, divinely transfigured

on Tabor, Whose light is His Body, and Who, instead of daylight, has the glory of divinity was revealed on the mountain to those who came up with Him. Of the inhabitants of that city John says, “They need no candle, neither light: and there shall be no night there” (cf. Rev. 22:5). What light is this, in which there is no variableness, nor shadow of turning? (Jas. 1:17). What is this unchangeable and never-setting light? Is it not the divine light?

16. How could Moses and Elijah, and particularly Moses who was a spirit without a body, have been seen and glorified by means of ordinary light? For they appeared in glory, and spoke of His departure, which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31). And how did the Apostles recognize men they had never seen before, except by the revealing power of that light?

17. In order not to strain your understanding too much, we shall keep the remaining verses of the Gospel for the time of the holy and divine Liturgy. We believe what we have been taught by those enlightened by Christ, which they alone know with certainty—“My secrets are for Me and for those who are mine” (το μυστηριον μου εμοι το μυστηριον μου εμοι και τοις εμοις)—as God said through the Prophet (Esaia 24:16 LXX; St. Gregory uses a variant reading from St. Lucian of Antioch); cf. the Prophet Daniel 2:27 ff). So, rightly believing what we were taught, and understanding the mystery of the Lord’s Transfiguration, let us make our way towards the radiance of that light. As we long for the beauty of unchanging glory, let us cleanse the eyes of our understanding from all earthly defilements, despising every delight and beauty that is not lasting, for sweet as it may be, it procures eternal suffering, and though it may enhance the body, it clothes the soul in that ugly robe of sin, on account of which the man without the garment of incorruptible union was bound and taken away into outer darkness (cf. Matt. 22:11-13).

18. May we all be freed from such a fate by the illumination and knowledge of the pre-eternal, immaterial Light of the Lord’s Transfiguration, to His glory and the glory of His Father without beginning and

the life-giving Spirit, Whose radiance, divinity, kingdom and power are One and the same, now and for ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

(Migne. Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca. Tomus 151: Homilia XXXIV: columna 424-436. In venerabilem Domini et Dei ac Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi Transformationem; ubi probatur quod in ea est Lumen, increatum esse).