

Last Sunday after the Epiphany - Transfiguration Sunday

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Exodus 24:12-18

NRSV

In 22:22-23:33, Moses has ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law verbally from God – both the Ten Commandments (“words”, v. 3) and the case law (“ordinances”) . In v. 3, Moses has told them to the people; they have agreed to their side of the Covenant. (God’s side is to be their god and to protect them.) Moses has then written down all God has told him. The pact, the union between God and the people, has been ratified in blood, “the blood of the covenant” (v. 8). Blood has been dashed against the altar (symbolizing God) and sprinkled on the people. (Vv. 9-11 are from another oral tradition, so I skip to v. 12).

Now God offers to put all the laws in permanent form, on “tablets of stone”. So important is Moses’ ascent of the mountain that it is mentioned four times in vv. 12-18. Moses leaves “the elders” (v. 14) in charge and commissions “Aaron and Hur” to administer justice in his absence. God’s “glory” (vv. 16, 17) is an envelope of light, a bright “cloud”, veiling his being: the people can see the cloud, but not God. Unlike the light from the Burning Bush (Chapter 3), this appearance of God is frightening “like a devouring fire”. Moses prepares to meet God for some time (“six days”, v. 16). “Forty days and forty nights” is reminiscent of the Flood, of the time the Israelites scouted out Canaan’s defences before entering the Promised Land, and of Elijah’s later experience on the same mountain. It is a considerable length of time.

Psalms 99

NRSV

This is a hymn of praise to God as king. The endings of Vv. 3, 5 and 9 are perhaps a refrain, said or sung by worshippers as they “extol” (v. 9) God. God, on his throne above the “cherubim” (v. 1, the half-human, half-animal creatures thought to hover above the altar) in the Temple, is to be praised by “all the peoples” (v. 2). V. 4 lists some qualities God has shown “Jacob”, the people of Israel. (His “footstool”, v. 5, is the Ark). For Israel, God has also: (1) helped people in need (vv. 6, 8); (2) given them just laws (v. 7); and (3) punished and forgiven them where appropriate (v. 8). “Moses ... Aaron” (v. 6) and “Samuel” were known for communicating with God, and were his representatives. “His holy mountain” (v. 9) is Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem stands.

2 Peter 1:16-21

NRSV

The author has written that God, ultimate “goodness” (v. 3), “who called us”, has given us everything we need for eternal life. What Jesus promised to us is our means of escaping the “corruption” (v. 4) of this world and of attaining union with God. So, he says, our faith and knowledge of Christ should result in ethical living, “mutual affection” (v. 7) and love. If we have these qualities and if they grow in

us, they will save us from being ineffectual and “unfruitful” (v. 8) in doing Christ’s work. If we don’t have them, we are “nearsighted and blind” (v. 9) and have forgotten the release from sin we obtained in baptism. So be steadfast in the faith; being thus will gain us entry into Christ’s kingdom (v. 11). This letter is written as Peter’s last testament as he approaches death, instructions he leaves to remind his readers of how to remember to be faithful. (vv. 12-15).

Now he speaks of the Transfiguration. While others (false teachers) have used “cleverly devised myths” (v. 16, deceitful lies to deceive members of the community: see 2:1-3), the author was an “eyewitness” to the event, one which showed the power of God and was a *preview* of Christ’s second “coming”. At that time, Jesus “received honour and glory from God the Father” (v. 17) when the heavenly voice identified him as “my Son, my Beloved ...”. (The “Majestic Glory” is the Father.) Old Testament prophets (“prophetic message”, v. 19) foretold the coming of the Messiah at the end of time; the Transfiguration *more fully confirms* this. Dear readers, hold to (“be attentive to”) this hope in these times of corruption and false teachers – until the Second Coming (“until the day dawns”) and Christ, “the morning star”, assumes sovereignty.

Vv. 20-21 make two points: (1) scripture should be interpreted in the community, not on “one’s own”, and (2) true prophets, in every age, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak for God; they do not prophesy of their own volition.

Matthew 17:1-9

NRSV

Jesus has told his disciples that “the Son of Man is to come ... in the glory of his Father ... There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see ... [him] coming in his kingdom” (16:27-28). Now he and the inner circle of disciples ascend a mountain. Jesus is “transfigured” (v. 2, given an unearthly appearance). An aura of unnatural brightness is linked with mystical appearances in Exodus and Acts; “dazzling white” is a symbol of transcendence. In Jewish tradition, both “Moses and Elijah” (v. 3) were taken into heaven without dying; here Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets. Both are associated with Mount Sinai. Peter recognizes Jesus as “Lord” (v. 4), both earthly and heavenly sovereign. In his suggestion of making “dwellings” he thinks of Sinai, for dwellings (booths) were erected on the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the events there, and a time when the city was brightly lit. On Sinai too a “bright cloud” (v. 5) symbolized God’s presence. The words spoken by the voice recall Jesus’ baptism and add “listen to him”: Jesus is not only God’s Son and his Chosen, but also the prophet God promised to Moses.

Early Christians knew the book of Daniel well. Vv. 6-7 would tell them that this “vision” (v. 9) is linked to the end times: see Daniel 8:17 (where “mortal” is *son of man* in the Hebrew). Moses and Elijah vanish into insignificance, leaving Jesus alone. The Church Fathers saw the Transfiguration as fulfilling Jesus’ prediction that some would not die until they had seen the coming of God’s kingdom; others saw the event as a prophecy of the Second Coming.