

Transfiguration 6th August or 14th February

Matthew 17 1-8

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Mark 9 2-8

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

(The King James version renders v.3 much more vividly

3 And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.)

Luke 9 28-36

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

The "Transfiguration" was the subject of considerable interest and speculation from the early days of the church. Although the Gospels do not name the "high mountain" it has traditionally been identified as Mt Tabor. As a symbolic "high point" – before what must have appeared to the disciples as a shattering descent to Jesus' death – the mountain is simply the physicalized metaphor of an ascent to God, and was so understood by the early commentators. A very famous passage from Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (c 185) is saturated with reminiscences of the Transfiguration *Human beings will therefore see God if they are to live; through the vision of God they will become immortal and attain to God himself. As I have said, this was shown in symbols by the prophets: God will be seen by those who bear his Spirit and are*

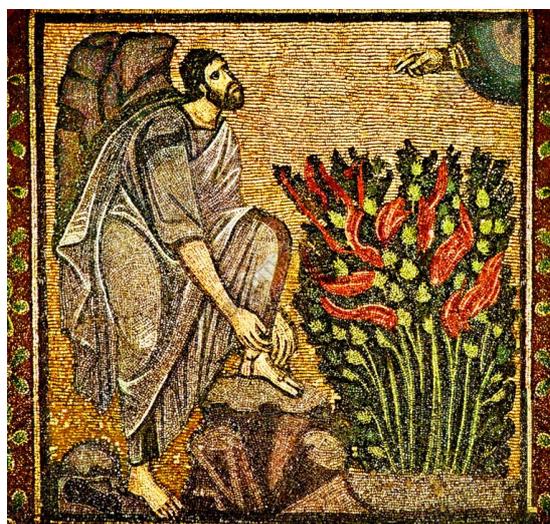
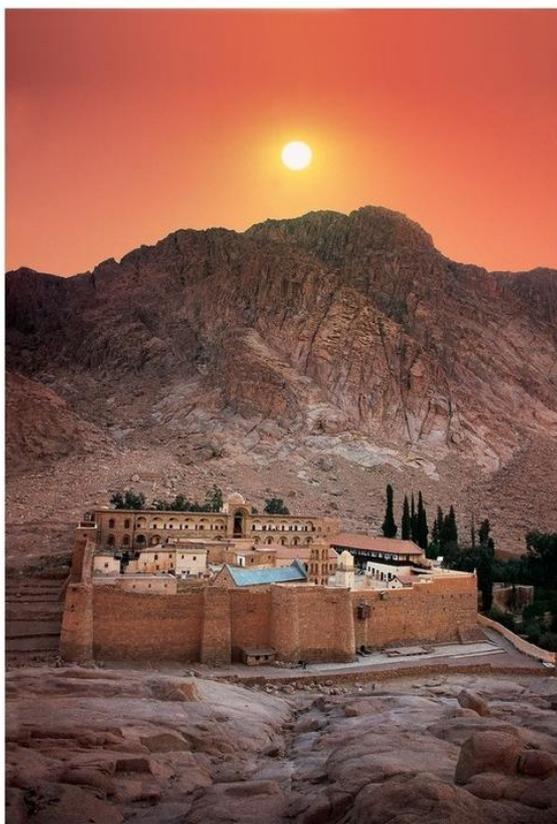
always waiting for his coming. As Moses said in the Book of Deuteronomy: On that day we shall see, for God will speak to humans, and humans will live.

In the same vein Henri Nouwen wrote

Jesus wants us to see his glory, so that we can cling to that experience... When we are attentive to the light within us and around us, we will gradually see more and more of that light and even become a light for others. We have to trust that the transfiguration experience is closer to us than we might think.

The emphasis on light is very characteristic of the Eastern churches, and images of the Transfiguration show this clearly.

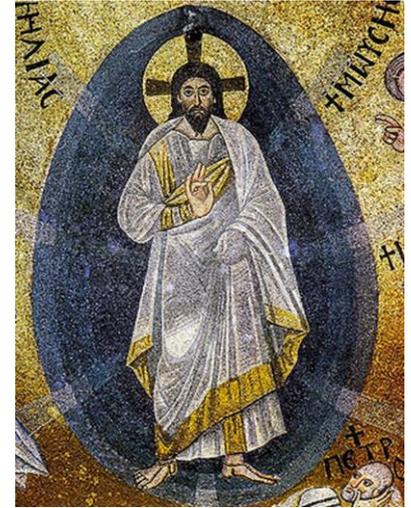
An extremely – and deservedly- famous example is the mosaic of the **Transfiguration at the Monastery of St Catherine at Mt Sinai**, executed around 560. This foundation was originally called the Monastery of the Transfiguration, and was built on the site believed to be that where Moses saw the burning bush – a scene which appears above the Transfiguration.



The curved half-dome form of the apse itself (Below) symbolizes the cosmos, with Christ in a blue mandorla which darkens as it approaches the figure – both setting off the white robes and referencing the creation of light from darkness.

The gold ground used for mosaics in this period – made by embedding sheets of gold leaf in the glass tesserae – causes the whole scene to glow with light, but in addition the rays streaming from Christ are subtly modulated in colour, so that they appear to pulse.

This would have been what the monks saw as they worshipped, and celebrated the Eucharist – note the direct gaze of Christ straight at us.



The detail (of St James – notice his name Jacobi above) was photographed after a recent (1999-2010) restoration of the mosaic, showing the brilliant colours dimmed by centuries of candle smoke.



Matthew, Mark and Luke also record an incident immediately following the Transfiguration

Matthew 17 14-18

14 When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, 15 and said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him." 17 Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me." 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

Mark 9 14-27

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15 When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. 16 He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17 Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 18 and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." 19 He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." 20 And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" 26 After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

Luke 9 37-42

37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." 41 Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

In 1516 Cardinal Giulio de Medici commissioned the two most famous artists of his circle to work on a pair of paintings – the Raising of Lazarus and the Transfiguration. The first was to be drawn by Michelangelo, and painted by Sebastiano del Piombo, the latter was given to Raphael, who ultimately produced a masterly work clearly stimulated by his rivalry with Michelangelo – the art world of Rome in the early 16th century was intensely competitive.

A studio copy of Raphael's initial drawing has survived, simply showing the Transfiguration. The final version is very different, since it includes the healing of the boy, and is in every way far more dramatic.



As was typical of Florentine painters of the period and of his practice Raphael made many preliminary sketches for the figures, and as there had begun to be an interest in collecting even these preliminary works by leading artists, some have survived.



By combining the two scenes the implications of the Gospel's placement of them in relationship to Jesus' mission, including the contrast of heavenly and earthly – literally above and below – and the disciple's continuing puzzlement is emphasized. Raphael has also stressed the pose of Jesus, as if on the cross, again in keeping with the Gospel contexts of Jesus' predictions of his fast approaching suffering and death, also misunderstood by his followers. (In the Mt Sinai mosaic there is a roundel with a cross immediately above Christ's head.) We notice too that the composition is based on a pyramidal structure, a common High Renaissance way of presenting a stable image, but here also emphasizing the idea of the mountain.

