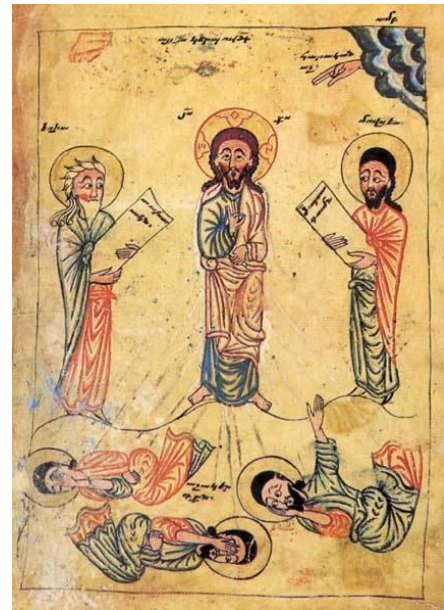


Jesus Discloses Himself as the Christ (3)

Drawing All Things into the Embrace of God: The Shape and Grammar of Christian Theology

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 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.' 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!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.



Matthew 17.1-8

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter's recognition of Jesus as the *Christ of God* – more than a prophet, but one in whom the *Presence of God* is beheld (Matthew 16.13-17) – becomes the pivotal moment at which *our own* recognition of Jesus Christ as 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1.15) is clarified and confirmed. This opens a path which leads to triumph and glory, but Jesus has to warn his followers that *first* there will be a reckoning with all the death and darkness. His destiny as the Word of God is not only to *inhabit the light* (as we might put it), but also to go to the *furthest reaches of the darkness*, that all who are trapped there may be freed, and the whole creation brought *back into the embrace of God*.

Peter (speaking again on behalf of the disciples, but also for *us*) protests against this apparent submission to the darkness. 'And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you"' (Matthew 16.22). But Jesus insists that it is *necessary* for the Christ to 'undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day

be raised' (Matthew 16.21). Certainly, it is necessary if those who are trapped in death and darkness are to be *saved* and *restored to God*. But none of this is a calling of despair. Everything unfolds from within the assurance of *God's Glory* as our ultimate homing-point and guarantee: '*For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father*' (Matthew 16.27) – and it is this vision of *glory* which is the *point of reference* which we notice before we embark on the path which will take us through all the suffering. That is to say: although Jesus' suffering and death begin to loom so largely that they seem to fill the whole field of our vision, *they never have the last word*; and that is the whole point.

By *bearing our own cross* and *following him*, we join the process by which Jesus – the Word of God who has taken human form – diminishes himself so as to go to the *furthest reaches of the darkness*. But he does so – and he invites us to join him as he does so – only because he knows that that is not the *end*; rather, it is the *turning point*, after which everything returns with him back into the *embrace of God the Father*.

The *architecture* of the Christian vision – if we can put it that way – is about that *return to God the Father* every bit as much as it is about the journey to the furthest reaches of the darkness which precedes it. The 'path of the cross', which becomes the increasingly insistent theme of the Gospel as it is written, is not like a *line* which starts with the Glory of God and ends with a descent into hell (as the Creed puts it). It is more like a *circle*, in which everything beyond the furthest point from the start is a *return*, 'from glory to glory' (cf 2 Corinthians 3.18). It is why John's Gospel begins with a light which *shines in the darkness*, but also the assurance that *nothing* in the darkness can ever extinguish the light (cf John 1.5).

No *prophet* could ever achieve this for us; he or she could only ever *bear witness* to it. But this *illumination* of our whole life, this passage to the outer reaches of death and decay in order to *bring us all home*, this path *from God's Glory and back again*, all is something which only God can do – which is why it is the *transfiguration of the Lord*, and the revelation through Jesus' own flesh of the radiance of the Presence of God, which immediately follows Peter's recognition that Jesus is the Christ, and his struggle with the calling of the cross. But it is the *disclosure of the Glory* which is the *sign* and the *key* by which all the rest begins to make sense.

The image shows the Transfiguration as depicted in a 14th Armenian manuscript.