



Sermon
Ecumenical Public Worship

7th Forum of the NCCA, 9-13 July 2010

by Archbishop Aghan Baliozian
(delivered by the Revd Dr Ray Williamson)

In the liturgical calendar of the Armenian Apostolic Church, today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Befittingly as we come together in fellowship and worship at this 7th National Forum of the NCCA with the theme of “Shaping Our National Ecumenical Footprint” we can look to this holy feast day to inspire our direction and shed the glorious light of Our Lord Jesus Christ upon our witness, by the grace of God.

The Transfiguration was a vision, a brief glimpse of the true glory of the King. As we read today from the Gospel of Matthew, this was a special revelation of Jesus’ divinity to three of the disciples, and it was God’s divine affirmation of everything Jesus had done and was about to do.

The distinct revelation that Jesus is God’s Son comes to us in three specific episodes. The first public declaration was at His baptism when the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the bodily form of a dove and a voice from heaven declared “You are my Son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased.”¹

Second, Jesus appeared to three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – in glorious splendour upon the mountain high, beside him the prophets Moses and Elijah. As Peter was speaking to Jesus, a cloud enveloped him and the prophets and a voice was heard saying “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”²

The third affirmation of Christ’s glory and purity was revealed in the resurrection and ascension which was witnessed by many.

Whilst the public witnessed the first and third revelations of the incarnate Christ, for the transfiguration Jesus singled out Peter, James and John. Why? Perhaps they were the ones most ready to understand and accept this great truth. Jesus took them to the top of the mountain to show them who he really was – not just a great prophet, but God’s own Son.

¹ Luke 3:22

² Luke 9:35

These three disciples were the inner circle, the closest to Jesus of the group of twelve. They were among the first to hear Jesus' call, they headed the Gospel lists of disciples and they were present at certain healings where others were excluded. Peter, James John would eventually play a key role in the early church. Peter became a great speaker, John became a major writer and James was the first of the twelve disciples to die for the faith.

When Jesus transfigured before them he was joined by Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament. Moses represented the law or the old covenant and predicted the coming of a great prophet. Elijah represented the prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah. Moses' and Elijah's presence confirmed Jesus' Messianic mission – to fulfil God's law and the words of God's prophets. Just as God's voice in the cloud over Mount Sinai gave authority to his law, God's voice at the transfiguration gave authority to Jesus' words.

The transfiguration revealed Christ's divine nature. God's voice exalted Jesus above Moses and Elijah as the long-awaited Messiah with full divine authority.

When Peter suggested making three shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, he may have been thinking about the Feast of the Tabernacles, where shelters were set up to commemorate the exodus when God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Peter was impulsive in nature and wanted to instinctively act, but this was a time for worship and adoration.

Like Peter, we too may have such inspiring experiences that we want to react in ways which are not intuitively correct. And at times with such experiences, we may want to stay where we are – away from the realities and problems of our daily lives. Knowing that struggles await us in the valley encourages us to linger on the mountaintop. Yet staying on the mountaintop prohibits our ministering and instead of becoming spiritual giants we become dwarfed by our self-centredness. We need times of retreat and renewal but only so we can return to minister to others. Our faith must make sense off the mountain as well as on it.

To give Peter credit however, his desire to build shelters may have shown his understanding that real faith is built on three cornerstones: the law, the prophets and Jesus. Peter grew in his understanding and eventually would write of Jesus as the “chosen and precious cornerstone”³ of the church.

It must have been such an overwhelming experience for these disciples to witness the transfiguration. We read in the Gospel of Mark of Peter, “He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.”⁴ So terrified were the disciples that when

³ 1Peter 2:6

⁴ Mark 9:6

the cloud enveloped Jesus, Moses and Elijah and the voice from the clouds was heard affirming “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”⁵ the disciples fell facedown in fear.

Jesus is more than just a great leader, a good example, a good influence or a great prophet. He **IS** the Son of God. When we understand this profound truth, the only adequate response is worship. Whilst the disciples were yet to understand this, we have insight today, the greater picture that assures us of Jesus’ divinity.

When the disciples looked up again they only saw Jesus and as they walked down the mountain with him, Jesus said to them “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”⁶ Why so? Would it not have been be a natural response to want to rave about the majestic phenomenon they had just experienced?

Jesus knew they did not fully understand what had happened and could not explain what they didn’t understand. Even though they knew Jesus was the Messiah, they still had much more to learn about the significance of his death and resurrection. Then would they realise that only through dying could Jesus show his power over death and his authority to be King of all. The disciples could not be powerful witnesses for God until they had grasped this truth.

It was normal for the disciples to be confused about Jesus’ death and resurrection because they could not see into the future. We, on the other hand, have God’s revealed Word, the Holy Bible, to give us the full meaning of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection.

The vision of the transfiguration which appeared before them would have evoked a multitude of emotions – terror, amazement, shock, exhilaration, curiosity – but mostly I would think - bewilderment.

In seeing Elijah, the disciples questioned Jesus “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” This question was based on the teachers of the Old Testament law believing that Elijah must appear before the Messiah as had been prophesied in the Book of Malachi.⁷

Jesus replied “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at

⁵ Matthew 17:5

⁶ Matthew 17:9

⁷ Based on Malachi 4:5,6

their hands.’”⁸ Jesus referred to John the Baptist, not the Old Testament prophet Elijah. John the Baptist took on Elijah’s prophetic role – boldly confronting sin and pointing people to God.

It would have been difficult for the disciples to grasp the idea that their Messiah would have to suffer. The Jews who studied the Old Testament prophecies expected the Messiah to be a great king like David who would overthrow the enemy, Rome. Their vision was limited to their own time and experience.

They could not understand that the values of God’s eternal kingdom were different from the values of the world. They wanted relief from their personal problems. But deliverance from sin was, and is far more important than deliverance from physical suffering or political oppression. Today more than ever, our understanding for Jesus must go beyond what he can do for us here and now. We should adopt an eternal perspective in our everyday lives.

The significance of the transfiguration is as profound for us as it was for the three disciples. As churches, we must look on high to the mountaintop upon which our life in Christ is founded and our witness of Christ originates. Our witness must be aglow, as the shining light of Christ in his revelation as the Son of God.

As with the earliest church, today we confront the problem of declining commitment and conforming to world standards, compromised faith failing to stand up for Christ. However as church leaders, we must lead by example to show the difference between light and darkness and to encourage the church to grow in genuine love for God and one another.

John, described as the “apostle whom Jesus loved”⁹, walked and talked with Jesus, saw him heal, heard him teach, watched him die, met him risen, and saw him ascend. John knew God – he had lived with him and had seen him work. And John enjoyed fellowship with the Father and the Son all the days of his life. What a far cry was John the apostle who walked with Christ from the apostle who witnessed for Christ.

Our gathering at this forum, in true Christian fellowship with other believers is powerful testament of how we can walk and talk in God’s light to effectively shape “Our National Ecumenical Footprint”. We must commit to three main principles in this endeavour.

Firstly, our fellowship must be grounded in the testimony of God’s Word as without this underlying strength, togetherness is impossible. Second, it must be

⁸ Matthew 17:11

⁹ John 21:20

mutual, sharing and respecting ideas and focussing on the unity of believers. Third, our fellowship must be renewed daily through the Holy Spirit in worship and Bible Study.

May the Almighty grant us wisdom, guidance, direction in our fellowship throughout these days and in our future mission together in the NCCA and as we commemorate the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us renew our commitment to faith life and outlook to eternal purposes. Amen.