

Eyewitnesses of His Glory

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Transfiguration is a turning-point in the mission of the Lord Jesus, representing the perfecting of His humanity and the return of His glory, and it is the key to recovering the Church's impact on the world.

Scripture: Isaiah 11:4, Matthew 16:24, Matthew 17:1-21, Matthew 28:18, Mark 9:29, Luke 9:29, John 17:5, Romans 8:17, 1 Peter 1:7, 2 Peter 1:16-19

Topics: "The Majesty of Christ", "The Impact of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Transfiguration of Jesus, highlighting that it served as a pivotal moment for the disciples, providing them with a vision of His glory amidst the impending trials of the Cross. He argues that the Church today needs a fresh encounter with the majesty of Christ to effectively address the challenges of a world dominated by evil. The experience of the Transfiguration was not only a testament to Jesus' perfect humanity but also a preparation for the disciples to understand the relationship between suffering and glory. Sparks calls for believers to seek a deeper understanding of Christ's power and presence, which can transform their impact in the world. Ultimately, he urges the Church to pray for a renewed vision of Jesus' majesty to overcome the impotence faced in spiritual battles.

Transcript

Reading: Matthew 17:1-21

"For we did not follow cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. And this voice we ourselves heard come out of heaven, when we were with Him on the holy mount. And we have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the daystar arise in your hearts" (II Peter 1:16-19).

That little clause in the hymn by M. E. Gates that we often sing might be the title of our present meditations - 'men whose eyes have seen the King'. Men whose eyes have seen the King! As we, in that hymn, pray the Lord to send such men, I am sure we all feel deeply and strongly that that is the great need of our time. The world needs such men; the Church needs them; and at all times when the Lord has had such men, and has sent them forth, the need has been met - His need and the need of others.

I think it is the 'seeing of the King' that really sums up this whole matter of the Transfiguration. That is why the Lord took the three leaders from the twelve up the mountain, in order that presently, with that vision made alive with meaning and power by the Holy Spirit, they might go forth as men who had seen the King. And what happened? We are living today in the ever-growing value of that vision.

The Setting Of The Transfiguration

The very setting in the Word, in both of the places in which the Transfiguration is referred to, as we have read, is significant and helpful. As you know, three of the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - record this matter of the Transfiguration, indicating, surely, that with these men this matter was of some particular importance. If John did not actually record the event, I am not sure that he passed it over, or did not have it in mind. We may come to that as we go on. But you will recall that, at the time of the Transfiguration, things were becoming increasingly difficult for the Lord. The growing hostility in all directions was pressing Him in, weighing heavily upon His spirit, and making His ministry more and more difficult, more and more limited. The shadow of the Cross was lengthening on His path. It is of this very matter that He now speaks frankly to His disciples for the first time: He speaks frankly about the Cross. The atmosphere was just charged with a sense of pending crisis - something is going to happen. It was at that time, in those conditions, that He took three from the twelve into the mountain apart, and was transfigured before them. It had a great relatedness to the situation which was developing.

In the case of the many years later, when Peter wrote about the Transfiguration, we know from his letters something of the situation. He begins his first letter by addressing himself to the saints 'scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia' - scattered SAINTS. Perhaps you know what it means to be of the "scattered" people of the Lord, in distant places, in lonely places; distance and loneliness creating their own problems and heart-aches. How things seem to ease up when we are together! There is such a sense of fellowship, a sense of life and of joy, when we are all together. These saints had perhaps known something of the great 'togetherness' of Jerusalem or elsewhere, but were now scattered, with all that that means.

Peter goes on to speak to them about the 'trial of their faith' - 'the trial of your faith is more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried in the fire' (I Peter 1:7). These scattered saints were knowing something of the 'fire' of tried faith. There is much more in his letters indicating a not too helpful situation for the people of God. The key-note to his letters is 'grace'; they needed to know grace. There was opposition; there was persecution; there were false prophets, false teachers. And, in that situation, Peter wrote and introduced this matter of the transfiguration.

This is significant. There is something for the people of God in this great matter in days of difficulty and adversity: indeed, what they and we all need at such times is a new vision of the King. That, amongst other things, is what the Lord Jesus meant for that little band of men. The three were commanded to say nothing about it for the time being, until He was risen from the dead. Someone has used his imagination in that connection, as to how difficult it was for these three men to hold their tongues, and say nothing about it, even to the others; but then, when He was risen, how gladly and eagerly they told the others and everybody of this wonderful experience. It goes to the heart of everything. If this is true - that is, if the Transfiguration was true - then anything and everything in the Bible can be true. If it was not true, then we can doubt everything. BUT IT WAS TRUE!

The Significance Of The Transfiguration

You are aware that the Transfiguration marked the turning-point in the mission of the Lord Jesus on this earth. He had gone to the farthest point of His travels north; from that outermost rim of His ministration, He would immediately turn about, with face to the south - to Jerusalem, and to the Cross. A resolute, purposeful, meaningful decision was reached on the mount; it was a crisis, a turning-point. We might say that it represented the very heart of His time here on this earth, if we could see it. But what did it mean so far as He was concerned?

(1) Humanity Perfected

I think it meant two things in one. It certainly represented and set forth the absolute perfecting of His humanity. Here He has reached the point of His own personal perfecting as a Man. This glorifying, this transfiguring, was Heaven's testimony to His utter and perfect sinlessness as a Man: that in all respects, whether of Hell's assaults and temptations and subtleties and efforts, or men's hatred, malice, trickery and what not, He had triumphed, completely triumphed. If we were to analyse it, we should have to look at the word SIN. But we can say this, that the sum of sin, from the beginning in the garden to the end, is UNFAITHFULNESS TO GOD - a breach of fellowship with God through mistrust. That is the very core of sin. Everything was concentrated upon Him, from every realm, if by some means, in some way, a breach could be made between Him and God. That would be sin.

But in His case it never happened. He met it all and triumphed. The first Adam failed, and all his seed have been involved - but here is a Man perfected. Humanity that God intended is here achieved and realized, and is therefore glorified. So far as He was concerned, that was the first meaning: Sin, with all its horrible entail, has been completely defeated in and by this Man; and therefore death must go. There can be no death, for death is the result of sin. If Adam had never sinned, he would never have died. This One never sinned: He could not die - He could only be glorified!

(2) The Return Of His Glory

There is another aspect as to its meaning to Him. I think it is quite clear that the Lord Jesus carried in His heart a great longing and a prayer for the glory that He once had. This is where I think John touches this matter very closely. In the seventeenth chapter of his gospel, he records that great prayer of the Lord Jesus: 'Father, glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was' (vs. 5). That opens a window and lets us see that the Lord Jesus had a consciousness of His eternal glory past: He carried it with Him; He knew about it - marvellous thought! - and that the consciousness of that former glory was ever prompting Him to pray toward, long toward, the day when He would return to it and it would return to Him. 'Father, glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.'

The Mount of Transfiguration had become an answer to His heart's prayer and cry and longing - at least a touch of it. A fleeting touch, but for Him it was one of those things which perhaps you know a little about in your Christian life. The Lord just does something - it passes, but you know by it that you have been heard; you know that there is sympathy in the Father's heart for your need and situation. It may only last for a day, or a night, for an hour, or for a little while, and then pass, because the end of the road is not yet; the eternal glory has not yet come; but the touch by the way is something that carries us on. We know the Lord has heard; we know the Lord has taken account of that inner cry and longing, and has given us a token of His sympathy. It was like that with the Lord Jesus - the answer to His own cry.

(3) The Offset To The Cross

Now, it is here that the Lord Jesus introduces, in a direct, frank way, the matter of His Cross. If there had been any hints before, the apostles and their representative, Peter, were completely oblivious of those hints; but now, at this time, the Lord Jesus comes to the matter quite positively, quite deliberately. Peter rises up as the spokesman of the others, in rebellion; he will not have it. But here it is. The Transfiguration was to be the offset to the Cross for these men, at the time when they should come to realize that the Cross was not (as they were then thinking it would be) the end of everything: shame and failure, reproach, dishonour, and despair. When they should come to see that the Cross was just the opposite of all those things, then the Transfiguration would take a new place, and they would see, as Peter says in his letter.

If you will read back in his first letter, you will hear Peter saying this: "The prophets sought and searched diligently... what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them" (1:10-11). Peter has got it right now; he has got it round the right way. First, when he would repudiate the sufferings, he is all for the glory - he is putting that first. The disciples were after the glory and were not going to have any of the sufferings; the Cross was something they would not hear about or accept. Glory, yes, but not the suffering. He has got it round the right way now: 'the sufferings, and the glory that should follow'.

Is that what Moses and Elijah were talking to the Lord Jesus about on the Mount? - 'the exodus that He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' - the suffering and the glory? The Transfiguration was the great offset to the suffering, to the Cross; and it was intended not only for the Lord Himself. It was intended for these leaders amongst His servants, that they should have the ground laid, the foundation put down, upon which presently the Holy Spirit would alight for seeing that not only the Cross of Calvary, but all its outworking, were in the light of the glory, had in view the glory at the end. These sufferings were toward the glory. They came to see that later.

You and I need that message. The message of the Transfiguration at this particular point is this: It is not now all 'transfiguration'; there is a lot that is of the plain and of the valley; there is the Cross. You notice that the Lord Jesus, in speaking of the Cross, said: 'He that would save his life shall lose it'. There is much of that to be gone through and experienced. But this is saying that all that - the Cross, His Cross, and the outworking of His Cross in the experience of His own servants - is unto this glorious end, that they shall be glorified together with Him.

The Issue Of The Transfiguration

We have to look for the issue of it in the incident that immediately followed, as they came down from the mountain. It is full of truth; too full for exhausting at this time. They came down, and are met by this distracted father - distracted over his boy, whom (in the original language) he calls 'my only begotten son'; his one boy. There are many emotional elements bound up with it, of course, which we can leave. But here is this father with his boy, distressed over the situation, and disappointed over the nine representatives of the Lord Jesus, the majority of His disciples whom He had left down below. He describes what is the matter with the boy, what happens to him, and tells the Lord that, although he had brought the boy to His disciples, they could not help him or do anything about it.

(1) An Impotent Church

Here, surely, in the Holy Spirit's thought in giving these details, is the suggestion of an impotent church in the presence of this demon-driven humanity on the plain. It is representative of a condition in this world and in humanity. Would it be going too far to say that the description of this boy's trouble and how it

affected him can be seen in counterpart in the world today? The world is under the domination of a power with which it cannot cope; a driving force, driving toward destruction; always driving toward self-destruction. It cannot help it; it is mastered by an evil power in this universe, driving, dominating, frustrating every effort; and in this scene of humanity's helplessness and need, a Church that does not know what to do with it, unable to cope.

That situation can be found in ten thousand things. We are all up against situations with which we cannot cope. Perhaps in your assembly, perhaps in your own family, perhaps in your own self, you meet with forces that are too much, driving; and it is always in the direction of self-destruction, of evil, of harm, of hurt, of injury; toward the fire and the water, to destroy and to quench. That is a good description of the evil work of the evil one in human life, and we have this small representation of it in this boy. Without indulging in unworthy criticism, and taking account of all the noble sacrifice and service and labour and toil of the servants of the Lord, we have, nevertheless, to say that the Lord's people, very largely and in a great many things, are impotent in the presence of these forces. The evil powers are holding the ground; they are defeating and defying every effort.

It is quite patent that those nine disciples had made an effort. 'Why could not we cast it out?' They had evidently tried and failed. Their effort and labour was for nought, and the enemy was laughing at them, holding his ground, while no doubt the critical world around was very pleased that these disciples were such poor expressions of their Lord, letting Him down like this.

What is the issue of the Transfiguration? Surely it is this, that there must be brought upon these situations an impact of the exalted and glorified Christ. It is a question of IMPACT! When I use that word, I am quite sure you will say, Yes, that is what we need: that is what the Church needs; that is what local companies need; that is what I need in my own life - an impact upon situations, upon places. This is what happened later, did it not? These men who had come to understand the meaning of the Transfiguration; these men whose eyes had seen the King - Jesus, perfected, glorified, exalted, attested by Heaven - men who had seen Him thus, went everywhere; and what an impact! Rarely, if ever, did they fail to register on this earth, in the kingdom of Satan.

(2) The Impact Of The Presence Of The Lord Jesus

And do you notice how Peter describes this? "We were eyewitnesses of His majesty" - His MAJESTY. Is not the need for the impact of the MAJESTY of the Lord Jesus upon this earth? It should be. Again, he says: "We made known unto you the POWER and PRESENCE of our Lord Jesus Christ..." I am sorry they have not translated that word thus; they have put 'coming'. Of course, the word is very frequently related to the coming again of the Lord Jesus, but the word itself cannot be isolated to that. The same word is used of the apostles, when they CAME into a situation. It is the same word, whether the 'coming' or the 'presence'. And Peter describes this as the "power and presence" of His MAJESTY. Yes, that is the issue. The power, not as abstract and unrelated, but the power of His presence in His majesty - that is the holy mount; that is the high place; that is what the world needs.

Let me use the word again - 'impact'! If it should be ours to see the King in His glory; if it should be ours to catch a fresh glimpse of the glorified Lord, that is going to answer the cry and the need for IMPACT. And conversely: there will never be an impact until we have seen Him as the glorified Lord. He is the answer to every need, and a vision of Him as exalted and attested by Heaven will bring new impact into our lives, into our ministries, into our churches, upon situations. Does not your heart cry, as mine does, Oh for a

recovery of the Church's impact upon this world! And this is none other than the impact of the majesty of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we know that that is how it will be when this word is actually fulfilled by His appearing at the end. When He comes, He will 'smite the earth with the rod of His mouth' (Isaiah 11:4). The brightness of His presence will be devastating to evil. There is no doubt about it that when that presencing, that 'parousia', takes place, there will be an impact. We cry for that; we pray for that. But the word is used not only of that, but in other connections, on different occasions. The same word, exactly the same word, as is used for the coming again of the Lord Jesus, is used of apostles coming into a situation, or being present there. It is used of the Lord Jesus too in this motional sense. He CAME, in that sense, on the mount of transfiguration; it was His PRESENCING in glory. Again and again He PRESENCE Himself, and every time there was impact - all pointing to His final great PRESENCING in glory. It is interesting, is it not, that Peter uses for the event on the mount of transfiguration exactly the same word as he uses for the coming again of the Lord at the end - the PRESENCE of the Lord.

The Present Need

All these are statements with which I imagine you will agree, both as to the significance and as to the issue. But we need an anticipation of the day of His coming, in the Church today - now. We need something of the meaning of that final impact NOW - His presence in majesty and in power. What about it? One of the writers who recorded this event tells us that Jesus went up into the mountain to pray; 'and as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was changed' (Luke 9:29). And when He came down, the key which He used for that desperate situation was the key of prayer: 'This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting' (Mark 9:29). What are we to pray for? What is to be the burden of our prayer in relation to this matter of impact, recovered power? If you have any sense of this poor world's distracted condition, and desperate need, you will not control your praying; you will not regulate your praying; you will not make prayer a legal system of 'you must', 'thou shalt...', and so on. If you are touched, as the Lord was touched, with this situation and this need, be it in an individual, or in a company, or in the world, or in the whole Church, the only thing that you will do - but you will do it - is pray.

And what will you pray for? What is it that will answer the need, the situation; what will touch it?

Now here is the point of departure. We feel the need; we are aware of the situation here and there, in this one and that, in this place and that; and of course, we do pray to the Lord and ask Him to do something about it; we do that. I trust I am not saying a wrong thing when I say that too often it is like the effort of the nine - nothing happens! The thing goes on, persists and defies you. You see, the need is not for that kind of prayer. What is needed is the kind of prayer that brings in the MAJESTY and the POWER of Jesus Christ; that is born out of a mighty apprehension of His glory, of Who He is, what He has done, where He is, and what He is doing now. That is what we need to recover.

About that we have much more to say. But - let us recognize it, face it, and acknowledge it - what is needed is this: the secret of bringing the majesty of the Lord into a situation; putting that power upon it. It is executive; it is dynamic; it is something which registers, and the thing is done. Do you not agree with me that that secret is what we need? And for that, I repeat, we need a new, mighty mastery, in our inner being, of the greatness of the Lord Jesus. We all agree that He is great; we will sing 'How great Thou art!'; we will not reserve or trim our words about the Lord Jesus in glory: but there is a gap between that and this situation. That is the tragedy and that is the problem and the perplexity of it. HE is like THAT, and yet

THIS is like THIS, and the two things are not brought together.

Why did He take those three disciples up? Not simply because He had a heart that longed for human fellowship. No! He knew who they were; He knew their future; He knew the position that Peter was going to take, and He knew the ministry that John was going to fulfil, right on beyond the lifetime of all the others. He took them there with Him with this one object, I believe, in view: that, in those coming days, when they would meet these situations on this earth, in this world, they should be in possession of the secret of His majesty, and that they should be a link between Him in glory, and this situation of shame and evil.

Is not that the vocation of the Church? - to be His link between Heaven and earth; to be the instrument of the registration of His Kingdom upon the kingdom of Satan? Is not that what we are called for? If that is not it, I do not know what we are for. And if we fail in that, we can do ten thousand things, and still the enemy will laugh at us. With all our efforts and expenditure, he still holds the ground so terribly. Oh, for men whose eyes have seen the King! To have done so means a tremendous thing in the life of such men. That we shall see. But here is the preparation of the way.

Before we begin to pray over situations, let us pray for a new vision of the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus, and then nothing will be impossible. I believe that is what was in the thought of the Lord when He said: 'If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed...' It is not merely psychological make-believe. If only you have grasped the smallest meaning of His MAJESTY, anything is possible; it is so great!

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