Conjunctions and Configurations

February 23rd, 2020

Transfiguration Sunday

Conjunctions are astronomical phenomena that involve the lining up of planets or stars to share the same ecliptic longitude. Though not exactly conjunctions, this month has seen beautiful configurations of Venus and Mercury in the evening sky and Mars, Saturn and Jupiter in the early morning sky before sunrise. It is sometimes said that our bodies are made of the heavens—from the very stardust. Earth shares an origin with those stars, if not always the same elements, so that we could just as truthfully say that our bodies are made of the earth and the heavens. That is not terribly scientific in any precise kind of way, but it is poetry dressed up in science. And it serves as an analogy for our spiritual life—we are made of heaven and earth—of clay and the divine breath (Genesis 1-2). The Gospels never hide the divine origins of Jesus. The nativity stories proclaim it; even the Gospel of John suggests it in the opening discourse on the Word that became flesh (John 1). The Gospel of Mark begins with the baptism of Jesus, but even here the voice from heaven proclaims his divine Sonship (Mark 1). Nevertheless, the gospels quickly bring us into the everyday life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus gets lost in Jerusalem, he takes a house in Capernaum, he attends the synagogue, befriends fishermen, he begins his teaching ministry; he spends time with tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans, and quite a number of wealthy, respectable and erudite scholars. It is easy, when seeing the gritty reality of his 1st Century life, to forget that this the Son of God walking amongst us.

The Transfiguration comes as a sudden and brilliant reminder that this is no mere prophet or teacher, but the One who fulfills all things. In a conjunction of Biblical characters, three luminaries of Scripture and history, we see Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. The representatives of the Law and the Prophets, which are fulfilled in the Only Begotten: “And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, 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 white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:1-5). Since Jesus would appear in his glorified body in the resurrection, one wonders what the meaning of the Transfiguration was for the disciples then, and now for us? According to Nikephoros Choumnos (1250-1327), a Byzantine government official, as well as a man of science and philosophy, the transfiguration is an invitation to turn away from the attractions of the world and their emptiness, to be filled with the divine life. He writes: “God has willed this in being transfigured on Thabor, and ordained it for the disciples in advance, for the reasons we have mentioned; but as he ascends to the mountaintop, he also wills that we should be there, and not remain below. We are not to be prisoners of the earth any more, or be dragged down to it by any of those who come from the earth and have turned towards it once again, nor are we to wallow around on it, nor cling to anything there, though it may cling to us. But we are to be light in weight and fitted out for movement, to ascend with alacrity wherever the Lord commands us in our journey towards the heights…We are no more to bring any shameful thing with us, from what has been produced by sin, nor should we make our beautiful form useless; but being baptized into it along with Christ, we must ourselves be conformed to him. If, then, Christ calls us to go up Mount Thabor along with them, let us not remain below—let us not stand far off from glory! Let us ascend with the one who ascended; let us all enter within the bright cloud, and share in the radiance that shines from it. God wants us to shine like the sun! As wee flee the darkness that pursues us but can never capture us, let us not turn willingly again on our own towards that darkness” (Nikephoros Choumnos, “On the Holy Transfiguration of Christ”, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord.* Tr. Brian E. Daley, S.J. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013. 314). The Transfiguration is thus an invitation and a foreshadowing of what we can expect from God’s lavish grace. For Gregory of Palamas, one of the most noteworthy theologians of the Eastern Church in the 14th Century, the transfiguration reveals the key to our union with God: “Who is it who was transfigured? The theologian Chrysostom says that he opened up to them a little of his divinity, as he saw fit, and he showed to those who were initiated the God who dwelt within him…this Christ, as God, is for those who live by the Spirit and see in the Spirit, and for those in the image of God there is no need of any other light for seeing God. For he is the light of the eternal ones, and there is no other. What need is there, after all, for a second light for those who have the greatest light? In praying, then, he shone forth light in this way, and revealed in an ineffable way to his chosen disciples that indescribable light, while the greatest prophets were there with him: to show that prayer is the promoter of that blessed vision, and that we might learn that through nearness to God in virtue and through union with him in mind, that radiance grows in us and is revealed, given to all and seen by those who strive without ceasing for God, through sincere good works and pure prayer. For ‘true and loveable beauty,’ as someone has said, ‘which can only be contemplated by one purified in mind, is what surrounds the divine and blessed nature; the one who gazes intently on its flashes of light and its graces, shares in some of what comes forth from it, as if he himself were changed in color, in his own eye, into a kind of blooming brilliance” (Gregory Palamas, “Homily 34 on the Transfiguration”, *Light on the Mountain,* 361-362).

Historical-critical scholars of the Bible sometimes theorize that the Transfiguration is a misplaced resurrection narrative that was reworked and placed earlier in the gospels, a theory which is probably not well supported (Stephen Williams, “The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ”, *Themelios,* Vol 28, No. 1). Truly, the Transfiguration seems to be a trailer for the Resurrection, as the ancient scholar Origen argued. One main reason that transfiguration must be a separate event from the resurrection, however, is that in the resurrection Christ is shown to retain the marks of his wounds (Luke 24:36-43, John 20:24-31); in the transfiguration, he has not yet been wounded, but he discusses his *departure—the cross—*with Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:31). There is something unsettling for the modern believer about the relationship between glory and pain. Our heavenly transfiguration can be mirrored by an earthly, everyday configuration—a change in our lives, our habits, our thoughts, even our bodies at times. Perhaps these new configurations may even involve a physical, social or emotional disfiguration. The apostle Paul addresses this most radically, perhaps. Concluding his letter to the Galatians, in which his warns the believers not to depart from the true gospel, Paul writes the enigmatic words: “Henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17). The word for “marks” is the Greek word *stigmata*, from which we receive the modern English words *stigma* and *stigmatize.* Who of us would like to be stigmatized for Christ? What were these marks for Paul? Physically, I believe they were scars left by the lash and by stonings, both of which Paul had endured. Perhaps Paul meant something more—something emotional and spiritual beyond the mere physical scars? What is clear is that the man who writes the hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 and the hymn to oneness in Ephesians 4 is not the same man who approved of the stoning of Stephen. The man had been transformed—first, by what had happened on the road to Damascus, but also by the continuing, shaping work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Some of these transformations and configurations were painful, as we read of his shipwrecks, disappointments, and imprisonments in 2 Corinthians 11-12. What were his wounds? They were the imprint of living a Christ-like life. They were the history of his resistance to evil and the temptations of this world written on his very body, on his life. In *Richard II,* William Shakespeare depicts the dissolution of Richard’s kingship. In losing the crown, Richard becomes a different person, albeit in a tragic way. In one monologue, Richard contemplates the possibility of what he can become: “I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads; My gorgeous palace for a hermitage; My gay apparel for an almsman’s gown; My figured goblets for a dish of wood; My sceptre for a palmer’s walking staff; My subjects for a pair of carved saints; And my large kingdom for a little grave; A little little grave, an obscure grave”(William Shakespeare, *Richard II,* III.iii.147ff). It is interesting that Shakespeare uses specifically Christian imagery to suggest what relinquishing a kingship or kingdom entails. As Richard speaks later: “Now mark me how I will undo myself; I give this heavy weight from off my head; And this unwieldly sceptre from my hand; The pride of kingly sway from out my heart; With mine own tears, I wash away my balm; With mine own hands, I give away my crown; With mine own tongue, deny my sacred state; With mine own breath release all duteous oaths; All pomp and majesty do I foreswear” (IV.i.203ff). In a similar way, we win a different kind of kingdom when we surrender our rights as kings and queens of our imaginary worlds, when the finery of our narcissism and worldly wisdom is replaced with the humble clothing, instruments and accoutrements of being pilgrims and Christians bearing on our bodies, minds, and spirits the marks of Christ.

Through transfiguration and disfiguration, through conjunctions of our lives with the life of the Trinity, God configures us to become what Jesus is—loving, holy, and radiant with truth and grace. Transfiguration Sunday is the last Sunday before Lent, and it seems fitting to pose another set of questions for us to contemplate as we enter this period of preparing for Easter. And the questions today are: Would you like to be transfigured? What marks of Christ have you carried, what marks of Christ will you carry in your lives? What indelible impressions has the Christ-life left on you? And what light will they radiate?