



Only Jesus

Lent 2020 - Online Retreat with St. John of the Cross

Gospel: The transfiguration (Mt 17:1-9)

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 with 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.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”



1. Meditation of the week: looking at Him and listening to Him

After our stop in the desert, on this Second Sunday of Lent we reach an initial summit, that of Tabor, “a high mountain”. It is not the “very high mountain” where the devil took Jesus to contemplate the “glory” of the

kingdoms of the world. For here Tabor is no longer a vantage point for looking down on the glory of the world. It is the place where another glory is manifested—divine glory. And this glory is manifested in the very per-

son of Jesus. He is transfigured; His body is penetrated by an uncreated light; His being radiates a light that comes from somewhere else. Yet this light does not come from the exterior but from the very interior of Jesus. It is as if for a moment **the divine light hidden beneath the humanity of Jesus was tearing away the veil of the body to make the secret of Christ burst forth.**

It's a new theophany, a divine manifestation. It resembles Sinai since Elijah and Moses are present there and a luminous cloud recalls the divine presence accompanying the people of Israel in the desert. But it's also very different because it takes place in silence and with few grandiose signs. Only a mysterious word passes through the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" echoing the voice heard at the Baptism of Jesus: "You are my son, the Beloved" [Other ancient authorities read You are my Son, today I have begotten you] (Lk 3:22). Yet this time the divine

voice is not addressed to Christ but to the disciples. It's an affirmation of Jesus' divine sonship and a call to listen to Him, words all the more precious since they are the only ones attributed to the Father in Matthew's Gospel.

• God gives us everything in his Son

Saint John of the Cross was profoundly marked by this gospel designating Jesus as the only Word to whom we must listen. In Jesus alone we find the Father. That is why John writes these well-known pages in which he dares to make God the Father speak, which is remarkable for an author who is so careful to underline how God is elusive and different from us. In this text, John invites us to put an end to our religious curiosity and to seek no other object of contemplation than Christ. Let us read and reread this powerful theological and spiritual meditation:



"In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word - and he has no more to say. (...) 'That which God formerly spoke to our fathers through the prophets in many ways and manners, now, finally, in these days he has spoken to us all at once in his Son' (Heb. 1:1-2). The Apostle indicates that God has become as it were mute, with no more to say, because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All, who is his Son. Those who now desire to question God or receive some vision or revelation are guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him by not fixing their eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty. God could answer as follows:

If I have already told you all things in my Word, my Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? **Fasten your eyes on him alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire.** You are making an appeal for locutions and revelations that are incomplete, but if you turn your eyes to him you will find them complete. For he is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered,



manifested, and revealed to you by giving him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom, and reward.

But now those who might ask me in that way and desire that I speak and reveal something to them would somehow be requesting Christ again and more faith, yet they would be failing in faith because it has already been given in Christ. Accordingly, they would offend my beloved Son deeply because they would not merely be failing him in faith, but obliging him to become incarnate and undergo his life and death again. You will not find anything to ask or desire of me through revelations and visions. Behold him well, for in him you will uncover all of these already made and given, and many more.

If you desire me to answer with a word of comfort, behold my Son subject to me and to others out of love for me, and afflicted, and you will see how much he answers you. If you desire me to declare some secret truths or events to you, fix your eyes only on him and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries, and wisdom, and wonders of God, as my Apostle proclaims: In quo sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae Dei absconditi [In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God] (Col. 2:3). These treasures of wisdom and knowledge will be for you far more sublime, delightful, and advantageous than what you want to know.”

(Ascent of Mount Carmel II.22.3-6)

The message is strong and simple: **in his Son, Jesus, God has told us everything and given us everything.** He can do no more than to give Himself totally through the one He has begotten. If we seek to know God, the only way is to learn to look at Jesus and listen to Him. Looking at Him and listening to Him, it's all there. Searching for God by looking or listening somewhere else is a waste of time; it's even an insult to the One who gave us everything. Jesus is our Brother and Companion. If He doesn't satisfy us when we discover His life in the Gospel, it means that we're more interested in our spiritual experiences than in discovering God—more focused on ourselves than on God himself.

• Resembling Jesus

If God gives us His Son as Brother, Companion and Master, it's so that we may walk at His side. It's useless to look toward heav-

en in order to keep moving: Jesus is there walking towards Jerusalem. He has come down from Tabor and we must follow Him. Perhaps, like Peter, we would prefer to stay quietly on the mountain just to take a break. No, we have to get back on the path and follow the Master on the roads of Galilee. **Holiness is not in contemplation or in action; it is in the faithful accomplishment of God's will and obedience to his Word.** Therefore, by looking at Jesus and listening to Him day after day, we become saints. No matter how many fasts and generous acts we may multiply during this Lenten season, if we don't take the time to look and listen to what Jesus expects of us, we'll have done nothing except what we want to do and we won't have grown in love. The most important thing is to decide to imitate the life of Jesus. So John of the Cross gives very simple advice to show us how to convert our self-centered sensibility: “First, have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds



by bringing your life into conformity with His. You must then study His life in order to know how to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would" (Ascent I.13.3).

At the beginning of his work, John emphasized the misdeeds caused by our selfish inclinations and self-centered worries: these ways of acting make us weary, torment us and distance us from God. Rather than always worrying about finding our selfish pleasure in all things, John of the Cross calls us to concern ourselves habitually to "imitate Christ in all". This must become a regular, repeated, daily concern. A famous reader of the Ascent will translate this in his own words three centuries later: "To ask yourself constantly what Jesus would think, say or do in your place" (Bl. Charles de Foucauld, *Conseils évangéliques*, 1927, Seuil, p. 39).

To know Jesus well enough to guess what he would have done in my place. Imitating Jesus doesn't mean growing a beard and long hair or wanting to die by crucifixion. It means trying to lead a life that would have been like Jesus' if He had lived at the same time as I did. At my baptism and confirmation I received the same Spirit as Jesus, so I can learn to know how Jesus would have acted in my place. **Conforming my life to that of the Son of God is the surest path to holiness.**

This imitation of Christ is not a non-human path. It is that of the Beatitudes, and therefore that of a profound humanization in Christ. Pope Francis says it clearly: "Humanity is what embodies the truthfulness of our faith; those who renounce their humanity renounce everything. Humanity is what makes us different from machines and robots which feel nothing and are never moved. Once we find it hard to weep seriously or to laugh heartily – these are just two signs – we have begun our decline and the process of turning from "humans" into something else. Humanity is knowing how to show tenderness and fidelity and courte-

sy to all (cf. Phil 4:5)" (Address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2015).

• Choosing the All through the nothing

John of the Cross synthesizes this teaching through a radical pairing: the All and the Nothing. It isn't abstract; as we heard on Tabor, the All is the person of Jesus. God has given us everything "by giving us the All, who is his Son." Therefore, the word 'All' can be replaced by the word 'Jesus' in several passages of John of the Cross. For example, concerning our desire to possess, John advises us:

"To come to possess all
desire the possession of nothing.
(...) To come to the possession
you have not you must go by a way
in which you possess not."
(Ascent I.13.11)

If the goal of the journey is to reach the All that is Christ, after having learned to resemble Him more and more, we must accept that we have no other objective in life. Either we are looking for "Jesus alone", or we will have difficulty finding him by searching among too many other things. It is to the extent that we seek the Lord first that we will find everything else! But to do so, we must accept that we are not in control of the path. It is also important, with the grace of God, to regularly renounce the small attachments that slow down our walking and prevent us from flying: "It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord. Even if it is tied by thread, the bird will be held bound just as surely as if it were tied by a cord; that is, it will be impeded from flying as long as it does not break the thread. Admittedly the thread is easier to break, but no matter how easily this may be done, the bird will not fly away without first doing so. This is the lot of those who are attached to something: No matter how much virtue they have they will not reach the freedom of the



divine union.”(Ascent I.11.4) Therefore, it’s time to take the weight off our shoulders to walk with ease towards the mountain that is Christ. No more hesitation this week! Chart a path for Jesus alone, who is both the end of the journey and the path that leads to it!

fr. Jean-Alexandre of the Lamb, ocd
(Avon Convent)

2. Three spiritual practices for this week

1. What is the artistic representation of Christ that most appeals to me? Do I use it for my personal prayer?
2. I remember an important moment when I understood that Jesus was a living person to whom I could talk and entrust my life.
3. I take time to look at and listen to Jesus in the way that works for me: at home, in a chapel, in nature, etc.



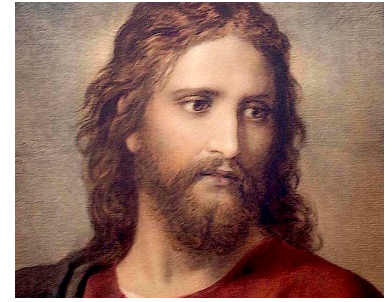
3. Pray each day of the week

Monday, March 9: looking at Jesus

"Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments." (Dn 9:4)

"Fasten your eyes on him alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire. You are making an appeal for locutions and revelations that are incomplete, but if you turn your eyes to him you will find them complete. For he is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered, manifested, and revealed to you by giving him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom, and reward" (Ascent II.22.5).

I choose a beautiful picture of the Face of Christ to look at it often and ask Him to let me know the Father.



« Christ » Heinrich Hofmann, 1889

Tuesday, March 10: the grace of wonder

"Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (Mt 23:9).

"You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire" (Prayer of a Soul Taken With Love, Sayings of Light and Love, 26).

I marvel and give thanks because God calls us to share the happiness of his life: the communion of the Father and the Son in the Spirit of Love.



Wednesday, March 11: imitating Jesus in intercession

"Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them" (Jr 18:20).

"Have [a] habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his" (Ascent I.13.3).

How can I imitate Jesus today by interceding for others?



« Le Christ guérissant le paralytique » Anthony van Dyck

Thursday, March 12: the knowledge of Scripture

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them'" (Lk 16:29).

"That which God formerly spoke to our fathers through the prophets in many ways and manners, now, finally, in these days he has spoken to us all at once in his Son" (cf. He 1:1-2, Ascent II.22.3).

I am thinking of a concrete way to get to know the Bible better: introductions, courses (online or face-to-face), magazines, study groups...

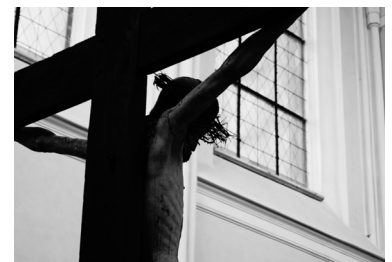


Friday, March 13: before Christ on the cross

"Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son'" (Mt 21:37).

"If you desire me to answer with a word of comfort, behold my Son subject to me and to others out of love for me, and afflicted, and you will see how much he answers you" (Ascent II.22.6).

In moments of trial, of suffering, of weariness, I look at Christ on the cross and I choose to trust him.

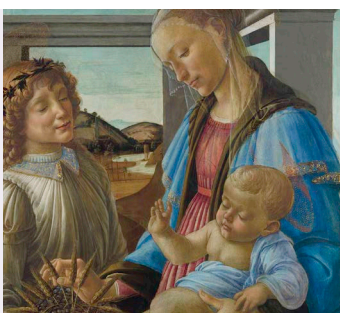


Saturday, March 14: knowing and loving Him

"Son, you are always with me..." (Lk 15:31)

"My Son, I wish to give you a bride who will love you. Because of you she will deserve to share our company..." (Romances 3)

How can I remain in God's presence throughout the day?



«Madone de l'Eucharistie» Botticelli, 1470