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From Hilary of Poitiers to Peter of Blois: a Transfiguration journey of biblical interpretation

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Abstract

The Transfiguration narratives have received considerable attention from New Testament scholars, but so far very little has been written about them from the point of view of their reception-history. The purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which they have been interpreted in the Latin West from the time of Hilary of Poitiers in the fourth century to Peter of Blois in the early thirteenth. Among these writers, from the big names like Jerome to the lesser known figures like Peter of Celle, a varied tapestry emerges where light allegory plays an important part, whether in the symbolisms given to the choice of the three disciples, Peter, James and John, or to the dazzling clothes of Christ as baptismal – a particular insight of Bede, which keeps recurring in subsequent writers and preachers. Unlike the East, where the Transfiguration became a major festival on 6 August from the seventh century onwards, the Latin West was slow to absorb it; but it was given particular impetus by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, in the twelfth century. Whether read as narrative in connection with Lent ('glory before cross'), or as a festival in its own right, the Transfiguration emerges as an unusually rich source of biblical interpretation that poses real challenges to the use of the religious imagination today. And it provides a significant contribution to the development of a balanced view of reception-history in our own time.

Introduction

The Transfiguration of Christ is recounted in the three synoptic gospels (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Luke 9:28–36) and, more briefly, at the end of the New Testament (2 Pet. 1:16–19). Although biblical scholars have devoted some energy to exploring the origins, development and meaning of these texts,¹ there has been little attempt to bring out the riches of its reception-history, a process that should not be seen in isolation from liturgical reading of

¹ See recently e.g. Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration* (New Century Theology; London: Continuum, 2004); and John Paul Heil, *The Transfiguration of Jesus: Narrative Meaning and Function of Mark 9:2–8, Matt 17:1–8 and Luke 9:28–36* (Analecta Biblica 144; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000).

the narrative.² Long ago, Michael Ramsey wrote a small magisterial study, concentrating on the biblical texts, but including some discussion of past interpreters, as well as questions raised by liturgy.³ In a recent book, I set out to fill this gap in a small way, and quickly realised that a proper discussion could only result from looking closely at the Eastern and Western Fathers. Having made a preliminary study of the East, from Origen (c.185–c.245), the father of biblical exegesis, who wrote his commentary on Matthew in Palestine between 246 and 248, to Gregory Palamas (c.1296–1359),⁴ I want, in what follows, to pay a similar compliment to the material that has been left to us in the twenty or so sermons and commentaries in a journey that begins with Hilary of Poitiers in the fourth century and ends with Peter of Blois in the thirteenth.

From the outset, it is important to note the nature of the evidence before us. Unlike texts from the East, the bulk of this material is made up either of Lenten sermons on the narrative, as directed in the old Roman tradition associated with the Ember Saturday before the Second Sunday in Lent, such as Leo the Great, or of commentaries on the gospels, such as the collection written by Bede. The Feast of the Transfiguration on 6 August that became so central in the East from the seventh century onwards took longer to reach the West, where its celebration was initially sporadic and its rank generally only minor.⁵ Indeed, we do not encounter the festival in preaching until the time of that great enthusiast for the celebration, Peter the Venerable, in twelfth-century Cluny. This inevitably makes the Western journey at first sight less colourful than its Eastern counterpart, exemplified, too, by the tradition of iconography in the East.⁶ But it does bring to light significant

² A notable example is John Anthony McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 9; Lewiston, NY, and Queenston, Ont.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), which covers the patristic period in both East and West.

³ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London: Longmans, 1949).

⁴ See Kenneth Stevenson, *Rooted in Detachment: Living the Transfiguration* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2007); the title is a small homage to Ramsey, who uses 'rooted in detachment' near the end of his book, *The Glory of God*, p. 146. See also Kenneth Stevenson, 'From Origen to Palamas: Greek Expositions of the Transfiguration' (a paper read at the First Meeting of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Eichstätt, Germany, July 2006), in *Bolletino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata*. Series 3, Volume 4 (2007), pp. 197–212.

⁵ See R. W. Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 13–39.

⁶ See Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Chestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005).

issues of biblical interpretation, thanks to the influence of Jerome, with his allegorical approach, who was influenced by Origen – whose love of allegory took longer to be accepted in the East.⁷ Attention will concentrate, initially, on the early fathers. But that must not detract from later figures, whether Bede in the eighth century or the lesser known late twelfth-century abbot and bishop, Peter of Celle, who (uniquely) has passed down to us two sermons for the feast. Moreover, in the East, attention on Matthew’s gospel is tempered by a small initial trickle of sermons on Luke’s narrative. In the West, however, with the exception of Ambrose’s commentary on Luke, Jerome’s sermon on Mark’s narrative, the Mark and Luke commentaries by Bede, and the (twelfth-century) *Glossa Ordinaria*, every single one of our authors has the Matthew narrative as his starting point, even though there are regular pulls in the direction of the two other evangelists’ variants; these are, principally, Mark’s view that Jesus’ clothing was whiter than any earthly bleacher could manage (Mark 9:3), and Luke’s assertion that they went up the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28), together with the conversation with Moses and Elijah about the exodus, the departure at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

Founding fathers: commentaries by Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrose of Milan

The fourth and fifth centuries provide a bevy of high-class names. First in the sequence is Hilary of Poitiers (c.315–367/8), author of the first Latin commentary on Matthew’s gospel ever written. Thought to date from his early years as a bishop (before 353?), though it does not appear to have resulted directly from sermons, it shows signs of influence from Origen in its allegorical flavour.⁸ Hilary’s Latin text begins chapter 17 with what later texts regard as the last verse of the preceding one (Matt. 16:28), the verse of promise that some will not taste death without seeing the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom: this he interprets as referring to the three disciples, Peter, James and John, whom he will take up the mountain with him. (Origen knows this as an already accepted interpretation, though he does

⁷ See Stevenson, ‘From Origen to Palamas’, *passim*.

⁸ See J. Doignon (ed.), *Hilaire de Poitiers: Sur Matthieu II* (Sources Chrétiennes 258; Paris: Cerf, 1979), pp. 60–7; for Origen, *Commentary on Matthew XII.31–43*, see Greek text in Erich Klostermann, *Origenes Werke*, vol. 10, *Origenes Matthäuseklärung*, part 1, *Die Griechisch Erhaltenes Tomoi* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1935), pp. 137–70; Eng. tr. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995), pp. 466–73. The literature on Origen is prodigiously vast, but for a survey of the overall scholarly views, see John McGuckin (ed.), *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), esp. the essay by McGuckin on Origen as biblical expositor, in which he suggests (p. 20) that it may have been Origen who influenced the primacy of Matthew’s gospel in liturgical reading and preaching.

not endorse it.) That kingdom for Hilary is eschatological, at the same time concerning discipleship and the cross. Like Origen he regards the ‘after six days’ as eschatological. Hilary interprets the three disciples as representatives of the entire human race, like the sons of Noah – a view soon taken up by Ambrose. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. The cloud is the Spirit of divine power, and Jesus’ injunction at the end about silence as a prerequisite for those of faith (those without could not take it in). The whiteness of Christ’s clothing is a sign of unimagability.

Next comes Ambrose of Milan (c.339–92), whose commentary on Luke probably dates from 377–89, and could well have originated in sermons. He is known to have been influenced by Hilary’s on Matthew. It went on to influence Jerome, and those many who read him in the ensuing centuries.⁹ Like Hilary, the verse of promise (Luke 9:27) refers to the three disciples. They not only represent the human race (again Hilary), but they also symbolise the Trinity; moreover, Peter is the church, the ‘sons of thunder’ (Jesus’ nickname in Luke for James and John) are the church thundering, and whereas Peter has the keys (Mt 16:19), James is the first high priestly follower (as church-leader in Jerusalem, Acts 12:2), and John is the one to whom Christ commits his mother (John 19:26–7). This is far fuller than Hilary, or Origen. Following Origen, however, Ambrose draws out the theme of spiritual ascent, but whereas he omits to emphasise the Lucan insight about Jesus going up to pray (Luke 9:28), he does address the other main variants: ‘about eight days after’ means completion, and the ‘departure at Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:31) means that Moses is to be seen in even greater glory in the resurrection. Following Origen, who in turn is followed by Jerome, Christ’s clothing symbolises the words of scripture. Luke recounts that the three disciples are asleep (Luke 9:32), because they are overcome by the sight of the divine glory. The cloud is the Holy Spirit (cf. Origen, Hilary and, as we shall see, Jerome), and when it comes to seeing ‘Jesus alone’ (Luke 9:36a), Moses and Elijah are one in Christ – and so are we.

Founding fathers: commentaries and sermons by Jerome, Augustine and Leo the Great

Jerome (c.345–420) yields a sermon, colloquial in style, on the Mark narrative, probably preached in 402 (Morin’s dating), as well as his commentary on Matthew, finished (somewhat hurriedly) before Easter 398. These works therefore date from the time of his maturity in Palestine; the influence of Origen is clear but, as Gourdain has shown, Jerome is his own

⁹ For Ambrose, On St Luke 7.4–21, see Gabriel Tissot (ed.), *Ambroise de Milan: Sur S. Luc I* (Sources Chrétiennes 45; Paris: Cerf, 1956), pp. 10–16.

man.¹⁰ The sermon and the commentary interpret the ‘verse of promise’ to refer to the three disciples; but he has no time in the sermon for explaining their symbolism, and in the commentary he even brushes the question aside, saying that he has dealt with this before. In a previous sermon on Mark’s gospel, where the inner cabinet of Peter, James and John are mentioned for the first time (Mark 5:37), he provides a variant of what we have seen in Ambrose.¹¹ They are the Trinity. They represent the three peeled branches set by Jacob (Gen. 30:37). And Peter is the Rock, James is the first to be martyred and John is the beloved disciple. In the sermon, Peter is still the Rock, but James the supplanter (Gen. 27) and John the recipient of favours from the Lord. We shall see more of this kind of mixture in future writers. In both the commentary and the sermon, Jesus’ transfiguration does not mean that he loses his human nature, an important christological truth, and his clothing represents the scriptures (cf. Ambrose); in the sermon, he interprets the Marcan variant about Jesus’ clothing being whiter than any earthly bleacher could achieve (Mark 9:3) to mean a truly spiritual approach to the scriptures. And as for the three tabernacles, in the commentary Peter is exhorted to look to only one, Jesus himself – another motif we shall encounter later.

Moses and Elijah are the Law and the Prophets, united in Christ. But whereas Moses is the one who died, Elijah was taken up into heaven: this is one of the several observations made about them by John Chrysostom in the sermon on this passage preached in Antioch while a presbyter in 390.¹² Also like Chrysostom, Jerome addresses Peter directly in order to

¹⁰ For Jerome, Homily 80 (6), see *The Homilies of St. Jerome*, vol. 2, tr. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, IHM (Fathers of the Church 57; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), pp. 159–68; Latin text in G. Morin (ed.), *Sancti Hieronymi Presbyteri: Tractatus Sive Homiliae in Psalmos, In Marci Evangelium, aliaque Varia Argumenta* (Corpus Scriptorum Series Latina 78; Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), pp. 477–84; for Jerome’s Commentary on Matthew, see Émile Bonnard (ed.), *Jérôme: Commentaire sur S. Matthieu*, vol. 2 (Sources Chrétiennes 259; Paris: Cerf, 1979), pp. 26–35. See also the useful article by Jean-Louis Gourdain, ‘Jérôme exégète de la Transfiguration’, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994), pp. 365–73 (where these resemblances with Chrysostom are not noted, although he does draw attention to a small parallel, in relation to ‘seeing Jesus alone’ (Mt 17) in respect of anti-Arian polemic, p. 369 n. 25); see Stevenson, *Rooted in Detachment*, pp. 23–9. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (London: Duckworth, 1975), pp. 222–5.

¹¹ See *Homilies of St Jerome*, tr. Ewald, p. 149; Latin text in Morin, *Sancti Hieronymi Presbyteri Tractatus*, p. 471.

¹² See John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew 56:3, 4, 5, 6*; Greek text in Jean-François Bareille (ed.), *Œuvres complètes de Saint Jean Chrysostome*, vol. 12 (Paris: Vives, 1868), pp. 427–33; Eng. tr. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (1st Series), vol. 10 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), pp. 346–7. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of St John Chrysostom, Ascetic*,

comment on the suggestion about the three tabernacles: this is a mannerism repeated frequently, in both East and West. In the sermon, Jerome (perhaps because of his own knowledge of the terrain) indicates that there might not have been the trees to build them up there in the first place! The cloud represents the Holy Spirit, as we have seen before. The voice is fundamentally trinitarian, another exegesis shared with Chrysostom that we shall meet later. And when Jesus enjoins the disciples not to tell anyone what happened, Jerome provides three reasons in the commentary that are also given by Chrysostom, and repeatedly taken up by subsequent writers: the kingdom has been revealed, people wouldn't believe it and the cross would seem scandalous to their spirits. The points of resemblance between Jerome's commentary and Chrysostom's sermon are striking, though they are based on sharp exposition, rather than allegory, which Chrysostom, the Antiochene, shunned as an Alexandrian eccentricity. Surprisingly not noted by Morin, they could be explained by Jerome knowing his work, or possibly by a common tradition, or even coincidence; in any case, however, Chrysostom was one of the people Jerome disliked, because of his anti-allegorical, anti-Origen views, and whom he went on to turn against.

The main sermon on this text by Augustine (354–430)¹³ is short but (characteristically) theologically profound, as Andrew Louth has demonstrated, yet proves not quite as influential as Jerome in the long run on later writers. It begins with the verse of promise (Matt. 16:28), which (unlike Hilary, Ambrose and Jerome) is not applied to the three disciples. The mountain is the kingdom of saints, Jesus' garments are the church, not the scriptures, as Origen, Ambrose and Jerome: we, his followers, would collapse without being able to wear them. Moses and Elijah are indeed the Law and the Prophets, as Origen and Ambrose. Peter wants to stay up there, for the solitude of the experience, but Augustine addresses him directly (as

Preacher, Bishop (London: Duckworth, 1995), p. 90, where these ninety sermons are described as 'the earliest and most extensive patristic commentary on the first gospel'. This particular homily, thanks to the authority of its author, becomes highly influential on subsequent Greek expositions, well into the time of the adoption of the Transfiguration festival from the seventh century onwards: see Stevenson, 'From Origen to Palamas', pp. 205–7. On Jerome's dislike of Chrysostom, see Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 177.

¹³ See Augustine, *Sermon 78*, in *The Works of St Augustine*, tr. Edmund Hill, vol. 3, part 3 (New York: New City Press, 1991), pp. 340–4; *Sermons 79 and 79A* (pp. 345–9) are very short, and do not add to what is contained in 78, which Edmund Hill thinks may have been Lenten; for Latin texts, see Migne, PL 38.490–3 (78), 38.493 (79), and PLS 2.808–9 (79A). For a study of this sermon, together with a comparison with Origen, Ambrose and Jerome (though not Hilary), see the excellent article by Andrew Louth, 'St Augustine's Interpretation of the Transfiguration of Christ', *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 68 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000), pp. 375–82.

Jerome and Chrysostom), challenging him to come down. It is a strongly christological sermon, with Moses and Elijah absorbed into Christ. Jesus' command to the disciples to rise up, that unique Matthean touch (Matt. 17:7), is a sign of the resurrection. Nothing is said about the command to silence on the way down the mountain.

With Leo the Great (d. 461), we have an unusual sermon, partly because it is one of only two (the other is on the Beatitudes) that is not festal in the collection of ninety-five that have come down to us; and partly because it is specifically directed for the Ember Saturday before the Second Sunday in Lent, when ordinations took place, yet there is not a single reference to ordination in what he preached. This is a 'first', because up to this point we have less firm evidence that the sermons of Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine were Lenten – likely though this may well be.¹⁴ He starts at the beginning of Matt. 17, though he refers to the verse of promise when discussing the three disciples; and as Bishop of Rome, Leo is conscious of the need to make clear that it was Peter's Confession (Matt. 16:16) that brought him up the mountain. For Leo, this gospel is a 'magnum sacramentum', a favourite term in his preaching, for it is about Jesus teaching the disciples that he is both God and Man, and that the Transfiguration would lead to the cross in order 'to remove the offence of the cross from the disciples' heart' (cf. Jerome). Moses and Elijah are indeed the Law and the Prophets, but 'the pages of both covenants corroborate each other' (again, cf. Jerome). Peter's enthusiasm is based on his craving for things eternal, but he is against the will of God: we should ask for the power of endurance, rather than for glory. The voice is both christological and trinitarian, as we have seen before. And he ends with a call to moral, Christian living: we should not be ashamed of the cross. In Leo, we see pastoral concerns interweaving with a developed christology, without the detailed allegorisation noted in Jerome. There was obviously some importance attached to this sermon, and it was not without influence in the future.

More commentators

I now come to a group of commentators who, with the exception of Bede (c.673–735), are not noted for their originality, but are nonetheless

¹⁴ See Leo the Great, *Sermon 51 (38)*, in René Dolle (ed.), *Léon le Grand: Sermons 38–64* (Sources Chrétiennes 74; Paris: Cerf, 1961), pp. 14–21; Eng. tr. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd Series), vol. 12 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1989), pp. 162–5. It is important to note that, at this early stage, by the time the gospel was read at the Embertide Saturday mass, it was already Sunday morning, thus obviating the need for a separate Sunday provision – which did not come along until later.

significant for what they convey to coming generations. Inevitably, Bede stands out as a giant – he became very widely read. What we have from him is not only a sermon, but intricate commentaries on Mark and Luke, which together present a synthesis of what has gone before, particularly from Jerome.¹⁵

Some of the main features of Bede's treatment we have encountered already. He regards the verse of promise as integral to the narratives, because they refer to the three disciples. The commentaries highlight the unique features of each of the evangelists; for example the 'six days' in Matthew and Mark are the 'six ages' of the universe, awaiting the (eschatological) seventh. Jesus is fundamentally teaching the disciples (as Augustine). He does not lose his humanity (Jerome). The garments, in the sermon, are the church (following Augustine), and in the Commentaries on Mark and Luke, he takes Augustine further by relating them to putting on Christ at baptism (citing Gal. 3:27), the first time we have come across this particular theme, and one which we shall meet again, thanks to the authority of Bede. Like Jerome and Chrysostom, Moses died but Elijah was taken into heaven. When it comes to the voice, Bede is emphatically trinitarian, in all three commentaries remarking that whereas the Trinity was 'revealed' at the Jordan, it was 'clarified' (i.e. 'made glorious') on the mountain. This is another exegesis to be taken up again. Perhaps surprisingly, it does not figure much in the East, though around this time, John of Damascus (c.655–c.750) makes a similar, but less pronounced, identification.¹⁶ Jesus' injunction to silence is interpreted in the same way as Jerome. Bede seems to have read everyone, but it is to fellow-biblical scholar Jerome that he owes a great deal.

Of the three Carolingian commentators, Rabanus Maurus (c.780–856), Abbot of Fulda then Archbishop of Mainz, Paschasius Radbertus

¹⁵ See Bede, Homily 1.24; Latin text in Migne, PL 94.96–101; Eng. tr. in *Bede the Venerable: Homilies on the Gospels: Advent to Lent*, tr. Lawrence Martin and David Hurst, OSB (Cistercian Studies Series 110; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), pp. 234–44; for the Gospel Commentaries, see D. Hurst (ed.), *Beda Venerabilis: Opera Exegetica 3: In Lucae Evangelium Expositio et in Marci Evangelium Expositio* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 120; Turnhout: Brepols, 1960), pp. 543–5 (Mark) and 204–8 (Luke); and Migne, PL 92.215–20, 453–6; the Commentary on Matthew, which does not mention the Gal. 3:27 exegesis (Migne, PL 92.81–2) is spurious. I am indebted to Benedicta Ward for assistance here; see also her excellent essay, 'Bede the Theologian', in G. R. Evans (ed.), *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 57–64.

¹⁶ John of Damascus, Sermon 1, Migne, PG 97.549–50; Eng. tr. in McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition*, p. 208.

(c.790–865), Abbot of Corbie, and Druthmar (d. c.880), a monk from Aquitaine,¹⁷ the most striking is Paschasius Radbertus. Rabanus Maurus relies heavily on Jerome (the three disciples represent the Trinity) and Bede (the use of Gal. 3:27 in relation to Christ's garments and the Trinity 'made glorious'); Druthmar provides another version of the choice of the three based partly on geographical symbolism: Peter is the pastor of the church (Rome), John teaches the divinity of Christ (the Greeks) and James is the first to be martyred (the calling of the true disciple).

Paschasius Radbertus provides a longer treatment than the other two. He is the first (so far) to draw attention to the non-selection of Andrew (who was, after all, the brother of Peter); the three represent the Sons of Noah (Ambrose), and the whole church, geographically extending to Asia, Africa and Europe, a unique self-awareness of the Christian mission. He repeats Jerome on the trinitarian symbolism of the three, and also provides a variant of Ambrose. There are also references to Origen; and when he discusses the presence of Moses and Elijah, he alludes to the forty-day fast of Jesus in the wilderness, which may be a side-reference to Lenten discipline, a theme in later preaching. Like Jerome, and others, he addresses Peter directly, in gentle rebuke: by now this must have become almost expected, rather than unusual. The bright cloud is the Holy Spirit (Hilary and Ambrose). We are into the era of creative recycling!

Lenten sermons

Commentaries are an obvious quarry for the student, the scholar and the preacher. But what of preaching itself? Four quite different sermons have come down to us, the first three of which reflect a monastic setting, while the fourth stems from a wider, more popular context.

Ambrose Autpert (d. 784), at one time Abbot of St Vincent's, near Capua, provides us with a prolix sermon to his community. Lenten in tone, not least because of a lengthy section on the forty days in the wilderness, it includes a considerable section on the Decalogue and Moses.¹⁸ He starts with the verse of promise (Matt. 16:28), following others before him. The choice of the three is adapted from Jerome: Peter is the Rock, James supplants others' vices and John is the evangelist of love. There is a recurring stress on our life of prayer, for which he calls in the Lucan variant (Luke 9:28), and he

¹⁷ For texts, see Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarium in Matthaem* 5, Migne, PL 107.996–1001; Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio in Matthaem VIII XVII*, Migne, PL 120. 577–89; Druthmar, *Expositio in Matthaem* 36, Migne, PL 106.1401–3.

¹⁸ For Latin text, see Migne, PL 89.1505–50; Eng. tr. in McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ*, pp. 293–316.

describes the forty days as ‘a great sacrament’, building on Leo the Great. He makes a great deal of the desert, with its bitter waters (the old covenant, contrasted with the sweetness of the new), and the experience of water and fire – which we shall see amplified by Peter the Venerable. Peter is addressed direct in Augustinian style – he doesn’t want to come down, but he must. And in a variant of Jerome’s treatment, he says that whereas Moses ordered a tabernacle to be made, Christ orders the church to be built.

Then we come to a sermon attributed to Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109), but written by some other (unknown) figure, that forms part of a series of gospel homilies, four of them on Matthew.¹⁹ Its chief characteristics are that it is synoptic in its approach, it is Lenten in tone, with repeated calls for greater devotion and self-discipline, and it is expository, but with some use of allegory. In the details, however, we encounter old friends. Following and adapting Jerome, the three disciples are the Trinity; but Peter has the primacy, James is the supplanter of vices and John stands for purity and celibacy. Like Bede, the garments of Christ are seen as baptismal (Gal 3:27). The disciples are overcome with sleep because of the glory surrounding them (cf. Ambrose on another Lucan variant, Luke 9:32). The preacher doesn’t touch on the voice a great deal, save to say that it is the Father speaking of the consubstantial Son. Only at the end, in a kind of peroration, does he wax allegorical: six days lead to the new creation, the garments are the scriptures (Ambrose and Jerome) and the disciples’ sleep is the sleep of spiritual contemplation.

Our third monastic sermon is from Gottfried, Abbot of Admont (d. 1165), in Styria, Austria, directed for the Lent Emberide Saturday.²⁰ Admont was founded in 1074 and soon came under Cluniac influence. In 1132, Peter the Venerable, as we shall see, enjoined that the Feast of the Transfiguration should be observed by all communities allied to Cluny. Although the (old) Lenten reading of the Transfiguration gospel was to persist alongside the (new) August feast, it is tempting to conclude that Peter’s decree took some time to take effect. Gottfried’s sermon, refreshingly short by comparison with the two preceding ones, starts off with yet another (!) variant of Jerome on the three: Peter recognises the Christ, James supplants vices and John tastes the sweetness of the Lord. Then we come across something new: the Transfiguration is compared to the sacraments, particularly baptism,

¹⁹ For Latin text, see Migne, PL 158.602–16; it does not appear in F. S. Schmitt’s edn of Anselm’s works.

²⁰ For Latin text of Homily 28, see Migne, PL 174.187–91; on Cluniac observance/non-observance of the feast from 1132, albeit in England only, see Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England*, pp. 20–23.

with the sign of the cross for those who approach, a clear reference to the catechumenate, traditionally interpreted in monastic terms. But he does not follow Bede (and others) in comparing Christ's clothing to 'putting on Christ' (Gal 3:27). That clothing is, instead, the spiritual life (we are in a monastic setting), which is about purging from sin, the gift of tears and the grace of the Holy Spirit – all very Lenten. Another new element is his explanation of the three tabernacles: Moses represents awe, Elijah represents preaching, but Christ represents love. The voice speaks with spiritual sense, not carnal. And the disciples descend from their mountain of spiritual contemplation: here Gottfried asserts more powerfully than even Anselm the reality of that contemplation, as well as the need to return to the world.

The fourth sermon in this group is an Anglo-Saxon homily copied down in the later twelfth century, which may well take us nearer the ground, away from the monastic environment.²¹ The overall theme of the sermon is judgement, picked up from the verse of promise and the preceding one, the Son of Man coming with his angels (Matt. 16:27, 28). We do not meet another such approach to the text, and this needs to be noted. The preacher begins with his own paraphrase of the narrative. Christ wanted to show his face as brightly as possible to his followers, on this 'middle earth', an expression he uses three times in the course of the sermon. That brightness results from light – another theme that mixes with the note of judgement. And he points forward to the sheep and goats at the Great Assize (Matt. 25:31–46), another feature we have not so far seen, complete with a reference to those 'made white through the bath of baptism'. There are signs of influence from Jerome and Bede. He ends with a call to do good deeds, and the hoped for promise of eternity.

Four twelfth-century commentators

In some respects, these four writers mirror the sermons that we have just looked at. They show the influence of the giants of old, such as Jerome and Bede; in other words, they aren't very original. But together they convey new concerns about discipleship, and a stress on the contemplative life, which perhaps is no surprise, given that they arose largely from the monastic school tradition. Bruno, Bishop of Segni (c.1045/9–1123) wrote a short commentary on Matthew, which briefly explains each verse; no allegory,

²¹ See Robert Boenig (ed. and tr.), with preface by Richard K. Emmerson, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 154–61, and notes, pp. 295–7.

just straight exposition.²² Anselm of Laon (d. 1117), who together with his brother Ralph, built up a flourishing school in that city, provides a slightly longer treatment of the Matthew text,²³ with glances to the other synoptics here and there. The three disciples are interpreted along the lines of Jerome and Paschasius Radbertus; the Transfiguration meant Jesus did not lose his human form (Jerome); Moses died but Elijah ascended into heaven (Jerome and Chrysostom). Ralph of Laon (d. 1134) had some influence in the production of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, in effect a collection of comments and quotations from ancient authors on the Bible.²⁴ Once more, there is nothing new here, though it is hard to underestimate the influence of this work on scholars and preachers around that time. Bede's influence keeps shining through yet again: the Trinity is 'made glorious'; and with Mark, the comment about no earthly bleacher (Mark 9:3) is taken to refer to baptism (Gal 3:27).

Peter Comestor ('the 'devourer', because of his reputation for voracious reading) was born in Troyes, and was dean of the Cathedral Chapter before 1148. He moved to Notre Dame de Paris where, around 1160, he became chancellor, and was put in charge of the theological school. In his *Harmony of the Gospels*,²⁵ he notes that Tabor is near Nazareth (a significant piece of information in a pilgrimage culture), that there are different theories about the three disciples, naming Ambrose (who has one) and Augustine (who doesn't); and there are four qualities of the resurrection body (cf. Augustine's resurrection interpretation), immortality, impassibility, glorification and agility, and all these are revealed at the Transfiguration before the passion. We shall see more of this with Peter of Blois.

A liturgical interlude

It is one thing to look at the reception-history of the Transfiguration gospel-narratives in sermons and commentaries. It is another altogether to try to fit in the slow emergence of the 6 August feast. As Pfaff and others have shown, the Transfiguration is an importation from the East, where it may well have begun as early as the fourth century as a dedication festival for the church on

²² For Latin text, see Bruno of Segni, *Commentarium in Matthaem III.XVII*, Migne, PL 165.217–19.

²³ For Latin text, see Anselm of Laon, *Ennarrationes in Matthaem XVII*, Migne, PL 162.1399–1402.

²⁴ For Latin texts, see Ralph of Laon, *Glossa Ordinaria*, Migne, PL 114.143–4 (Matthew), 212–13 (Mark), and 279–82 (Luke); see also Jenny Swanson, 'The *Glossa Ordinaria*', in Evans, (ed.) *The Medieval Theologians*, pp. 156–67.

²⁵ For Latin text, see Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica: In Evangelia* 86, Migne, PL 198.1581–2.

Mount Tabor, celebrated generally through the Jerusalem jurisdiction by the seventh century, and probably taken to Constantinople by Andrew of Crete during his time there (685–92).²⁶ Its first appearances in the West are around the year 1000, from fragments found at Peterling (Payerne) from the south of Italy, an area of strong Byzantine influence, and also at Vich in southern Spain. There is also sporadic evidence in France and Italy in the eleventh century. And whereas some of the foregoing sermons begin their text with the verse of promise (Matt. 16:28), the festal reading invariably starts at Matt. 17:1 – in line with a similar shift in the East, although there is, as Pfaff notes, some sporadic use of Mark in some Monte Cassino texts around the tenth/eleventh centuries,²⁷ perhaps a sign of the enduring importance of Jerome's sermon on the Marcan narrative.

In the twelfth century, John of Würzburg tells of its celebration in the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, by the Crusaders; and we have the same kind of evidence from the same century with John Beleth, and from Sicard of Cremona (c.1155–1215).²⁸ Transfiguration is creeping in, but as an option, and nowhere near the major festival that it had long been in the East. Pope Callixtus III promulgated it throughout the Catholic Church in 1457, linking it with the news of the defeat of the Turks at Belgrade, which had reached Rome the previous year on 6 August. But its main proponent before this time was Peter the Venerable (1092/4–1156), eighth Abbot of Cluny from 1122, who directed it to be celebrated as a major festival throughout the Cluniac congregation in 1132. We are now ready to take the crucial step from Lenten homily and biblical commentary to festal preachment.

Festal sermons and a discourse

My final group, involving three people with the name of Peter, consists of a collection of three sermons, one by Peter the Venerable,²⁹ two by Peter of

²⁶ See Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England*, pp. 13–15; V. Grummel, 'Sur l'ancienneté de la fête de la Transfiguration', *Revue des Études Byzantines* 14 (1956), pp. 209–10; J. Tomajean, 'La Fête de la Transfiguration (6 août)', *L'Orient Syrien* 5 (1960), pp. 479–82; and Stevenson, 'From Origen to Palamas', p. 205.

²⁷ See Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England*, p. 15 n. 4.

²⁸ See John of Würzburg, *Monumenta de Bello Sacro*, Migne, PL 155.1089–90; John Beleth, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* 144, Migne, PL 202.147; and Sicard of Cremona, *Mitrale* 38, Migne, PL 213.419; see also Alan of Lille (1120–1203), monk of Cîteaux, *Contra Haereticos Libri Quattuor* 1.19, Migne, PL 210.521, where he makes belief in the transfigured Christ a point of orthodoxy.

²⁹ Peter the Venerable, *Sermones* 1, Migne, PL 189.953–72 (for 'carnem deificatam', see 959, 965, 968); see also Dom Jean Leclercq, *Pierre le Vénérable (Figures Monastiques; Fontenelle: Abbaye S.Wandrille, 1946)*, pp. 325–40, and pp. 379–90 (on the Office); see also Stevenson, *Rooted in Detachment*, pp. 122–6 and 'The Transfiguration Sermon of

Celle (1115–83),³⁰ and a short discourse by Peter of Blois (1134–1204).³¹ They are all indubitably connected with the (new) 6 August feast. They build on the exegetical tradition we have seen thus far, which has been mainly associated, as far as preaching is concerned, with Lent. That by Peter the Venerable heads up a collection of his sermons, and has therefore something of a ‘set piece’ prominence about it, and next only to Ambrose Autpert, it is the longest we are looking at. This is probably because it was subsequently used within the Cluniac congregation and beyond long after his death; extracts from it were frequently included in the night office. In all these three writers we become aware of a shift that took place much earlier in the East: the narrative has indeed to be explained, but there is a growing sense of a ‘theology’ of the Transfiguration in its own right.

Peter the Venerable begins on the theme of the light of the glory of the incarnate Christ (John 1:14), a starting point we have not come across so far, but not unknown in the Greek tradition, beginning with Anastasius of Mount Sinai (d. c.700), who was *hegoumenos* of St Catherine’s Abbey there.³² This takes him straight to Christ’s baptism (Matt. 3:17): the Transfiguration is about christological and trinitarian revelation. He refers throughout to all three synoptic narratives, although he doesn’t deal with the later part of the drama at all (Matt. 17:6–9). Following Bede, he links the baptism of Christ with the Transfiguration, where the Trinity is revealed in the former, and made glorious in the latter. Like Leo the Great and John Chrysostom, there is a moral ending, challenging his hearers to live lives worthy of Christ. His exegesis is not overtly allegorical, although he follows Jerome in seeing the three disciples as representing the Trinity. He adapts Jerome, rather like Gottfried, over their characteristics, with Peter recognising Jesus, James supplanting vices and John being full of grace, and he labours these aspects more than any other preacher so far. But he ups the theological stakes when Jesus reaches the top of the mountain. For here, Transfiguration he interprets in terms of Christ’s ‘deified body’ (he uses this expression no fewer than three times). ‘Theōsis’ (inspired by the seminal text, 2 Pet. 1:9) has a long history in the Greek fathers, but it is dealt with more recently in the West: the

Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny’, in Simon Jones and Melanie Ross (eds), *The Serious Business of Worship: Essays in Honour of Bryan D. Spinks* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2009)

³⁰ Peter of Celle, *Sermones* 65 and 66, Migne, PL 202.840–3, 843–8; see also Jean Leclercq, OSB, *La Spiritualité de Pierre de Celle (1115–1183)* (Études de Théologie et d’Histoire de la Spiritualité 7; Paris: Vrin, 1946), esp. pp. 147–67, where he is strong on the Tabernacle of Moses, which, however, does not figure at all in his treatment of Moses in either sermon.

³¹ Peter of Blois, *De Transfiguratione Domini*, Migne, PL 207.777–92.

³² For Anastasius of Mount Sinai, see A. Le Guillou, ‘Le monastère de la Théotokos au Sinai’, *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire* 67 (1955), pp. 237–57.

first time we come across it in preaching about the Transfiguration is with Andrew of Crete (c.660–740), in respect of our divinisation.³³ But Peter does not go as far as this: Christ's body is deified – and revealed as such – and that is part of the mystery of the Transfiguration.

The glorified 'face' of Christ, shining like the sun, still has to go on to endure suffering. This leads him, through a discussion of Christ's garments, into the spiritual clothing of his followers, through fire and water (Ambrose Autpert), baptism and the giving of the Spirit. But here he does not draw in Bede's use of Gal 3:27, putting on Christ. Instead of that, and instead of Ambrose Autpert's 'bitter waters', he adds his own third (monastic) dimension – herbs, signifying humility, cleansing, penance, the work of the heavenly bleacher. When it comes to Moses and Elijah, he piles on the imagery, identifying them not only as Law and Prophets, as of old, but highlighting Moses' gentleness and Elijah's severity (we shall come across this theme in Peter of Blois), a subtle way of pointing to the double-edged character of the gospel. This he elaborates at some length, and he follows Jerome (and Chrysostom) with the contrast that Moses died and Elijah was taken up into heaven. Peter is (as we have now come to expect) addressed directly. And the sermon ends with a great invocation of the saints and patriarchs, and an elaboration on the voice, with the repeated 'hic est', 'this is . . .', of many attributes of the incarnate Son. Peter the Venerable's devotion to the feast is indicated by the lengths to which he goes in this, the longest sermon so far. There was a Cluniac community on Mount Tabor during his abbacy, which Peter valued in relation to the feast, and I have already drawn attention to Eastern features in his overall approach, very unusual for this time. Peter's 'theology' of the Transfiguration feast is the most powerful and most systematically thought out that we have encountered.

Peter of Celle was Abbot of Celle in the diocese of Troyes, c.1145, then Abbot of St Remigius, Reims (1162), before becoming Bishop of Chartres in his final years (1180–3). The two sermons for the feast, both quite short, cover similar material, but with different starting points. The first has an unusual text, the eagle soaring and nestling her young, from the Canticle of Moses (Deut. 32:11). The overlying theme is glory (cf. Peter the Venerable), and he refers the eagle image directly to the Transfiguration: 'there is an eagle-like evolution in the transfiguration of the Lord . . . there is nothing artificial

³³ For Andrew of Crete, *Sermon 7*, Migne, PG 97.931–58; on deification, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: University Press, 2004).

in the transfiguration'. He alludes to the fast of forty days, perhaps reflecting the earlier Lenten context of the narrative; Moses died, Elijah ascended, and the voice is about one Lord, one faith, one baptism. The second sermon, which does not have a text, is more christological. Christ concealed the divine nature under the veil of flesh. The voice is trinitarian. The garments are the gospel (cf. Jerome). And he has an interesting twist on Moses and Elijah – Moses would not have convinced the Jews about the identity of Christ, and Elijah would not have convinced the pagans. This shows the medieval church's inter-faith self-awareness in a way we have not so far seen. The cloud symbolises the scriptures, and by derivation the Catholic Church, another statement of ecclesiology; this combines Augustine's interpretation with Ambrose Autpert on Christ wanting one tabernacle built, the church.

Finally, Peter of Blois was educated at Tours, taught in Paris (1164), became Archdeacon of Bath (1174) and was an adviser to Henry II. He provides a short discourse, which may well have been the inspiration for a sermon. This is the first and only such work in our remit, and forms its own endorsement of the new feast. After an introduction, which sets the spiritual context of ascending the mountain of contemplation, the centrality of the theme of glory and the ministry of Moses and Elijah, we proceed to a treatment of the narrative. The Transfiguration is about the glory (Jesus' face like the sun), the agility (walking on water), the subtlety (going through closed doors) and the immortality (the risen body) of the resurrection (cf. Peter Comestor). Christ's garments are likened to baptism (Gal 3:27 – Bede, and others, again), and Moses and Elijah exemplify gentleness (on the one hand) and severity (on the other); this can be compared with Peter the Venerable, whose sermon he is bound to have known, given his interest in the subject. There is one tabernacle, the eucharist, and the cloud glorifies the Trinity, just as it was revealed at the baptism of Christ (Bede).

Conclusion

There is too much varied material – garnered over nearly a thousand years – to be harvested into a series of neat, clear conclusions. But we can note straight away the prominence of Jerome as well as Augustine, building on Hilary and Ambrose; the earlier influence of Origen, particularly on Jerome, in the allegorical approach to exegesis; and Eastern 'symptoms' that occur from time to time, starting with Chrysostom. Quite when – and where – preaching on the Transfiguration narrative at some stage in connection with the pre-paschal fast as 'glory before cross' became the norm is hard to say, though it does make a lot of sense.

From Jerome we move on to Bede, who gives us not only a sermon on Matthew's narrative, possibly for Lent, but a commentary on Mark and Luke. It is Matthew's narrative that comes to be most read, e.g. at Rome, as we see with Leo the Great, on the Ember Saturday of Lent; and it is also used on the (much later) 6 August festival. Bede's two commentaries doubtless served to encourage those regular nods in the direction of Marcan and Lucan variants that we have seen as a regular part of preaching. Jerome establishes the trinitarian (and other) symbolisms of the three disciples, together with the trinitarian interpretation of the voice, that goes back to Hilary of Poitiers. Bede's unique emphasis on the Trinity as revealed at Jordan but glorified on the mountain, and his Augustine-inspired ecclesiological view of Christ's garments, but specifically through baptism and Gal 3:27, keep recurring in subsequent preaching and exegesis.

Like the twelfth-century commentators, the Carolingians offer little that is new, but they are meticulous in the way they collect and gently adapt inherited material. Lenten preaching builds on those foundations, notably with Ambrose Autpert and Ps.-Anselm of Canterbury, reflecting, too, the tradition that to be a monk is to live in a continuous Lent. It is not until we come to the brilliance of Peter the Venerable that we are face to face with a real synthesis of what has gone before, refracted through some of the Eastern fathers, notably in the theme of 'deification', and all within a context of a feast which is developing a theology of its own. Peter of Celle's soaring eagle – a rich biblical image if ever there was one! – provides a unique starting point for his preaching, probably drawn from his own experience of watching such a bird in glorious flight. And Peter of Blois helps us not to forget that Transfiguration is about resurrection.

The story, of course, does not end. Details and methods of exegesis, whether in the Latin West or elsewhere, do not necessarily begin in every single instance with their first documented appearance, though we should doubtless give the honour of originality to the big names. There are clearly common strands of interpretation at work, passed on or adapted, or discarded in order to make way for new concerns, which other evidence (were it to be known) would doubtless corroborate, enrich or confuse! It may be well be that Hilary's view of the three disciples as representatives of the entire human race is more appealing than Jerome's Trinity. And when we gaze at those glorified garments, we are left to choose between Ambrose's scriptures, or Augustine's church, particularly when developed by Bede into the baptismal robe. What we are dealing with here is the religious imagination, which is never given once and for all to any age.

One of the many issues raised by this material is the relationship between Greek East and Latin West, which surfaces, albeit in different ways, in

Jerome and Peter the Venerable. Signs of the trinitarian and christological controversies are discernible in some of the preaching in the East before the feast was actually observed.³⁴ Yet we do not encounter such a degree of sensitivity in the Latin authors, although they all see the christological and trinitarian implications of the narrative (not the same thing) from the very beginning, just as we find in the East. But there are two significant trajectories that have something of an irony to them. The feast was established in Jerusalem by the time of Anastasius of Mount Sinai in the seventh century, and he was among the first in the East to identify Christ's garments with the scriptures: by that time Origen's allegorical approach was more acceptable, thanks to the work of Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662), and Origen's view was that they represented the gospels.³⁵ In the West, by contrast, allegory (however sparingly applied) was nevertheless handed down by such figures as Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine with an ease that inspired nearly all subsequent preachers and commentators – and yet the feast itself was not to emerge in any vigour until the twelfth century.

All this, however, will never be the whole story of the way the Christian community relates to the scriptures, not least in these sermons, with their specifically liturgical context. Some of them obviously connected with the religious imagination of their hearers in a very powerful way. Fortunately, allegory is nowadays no longer regarded as the poor relation of biblical interpretation, thanks to the renewed awareness of the literary character of the gospels, and a less narrow approach to ancient interpreters, who bore so many fruits, doctrinal, moral, spiritual. Indeed, what these writers demonstrate is how this kind of allegory can illuminate scripture, which is a different process from imposing itself on a whole passage in order to yield a somewhat artificial, dogmatic result.³⁶

Overall, a wider view may well reveal that the East has made more of Transfiguration than the West (without considering the feast's virtual abolition at the Reformation, together with the disappearance of the Lenten

³⁴ See e.g. the sermon attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, but probably preached either by Ephrem of Amid (Patriarch of Antioch 527–45) or Isaac of Antioch (d. 460/1), with its lengthy section contrasting the divine/human natures of Christ, text in J. Assemani, *Sancti Patris Ephraem Nostri Syri Opera Omnia*, vol. 2 (Rome: Vatican, 1732), pp. 41–9; see also Stevenson, 'From Origen to Palamas', pp. 203–4.

³⁵ On Maximus, see Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, pp. 262–95; See also Stevenson, 'From Origen to Palamas', p. 206 n. 30.

³⁶ See e.g. R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). I am indebted to Martin Kitchen for much assistance here.

reading as well).³⁷ But what we have here are firm foundations, some familiar, some less so, for a greater awareness of what the early and medieval West has to offer, which can only enrich our walk up that mountain. Whether read in connection with Lent as ‘glory before cross’ or celebrated as a feast on 6 August – and the ecumenical consensus of today favours both – Transfiguration continues to fascinate, with its rich associations that are as much encapsulated in the gospel narratives as suggested by them. For it is here that we have a unique and lasting glimpse of our christological, trinitarian faith – with the persistent, underlying message of pilgrimage, revelation, promise and change.³⁸

³⁷ See Kenneth Stevenson, “‘Rooted in Detachment’: Transfiguration as Narrative, Worship, and Community of Faith”, *Ecclesiology* 1/3 (2005), pp. 21–2 (whole article, pp. 13–26); the feast was retained, but only in the Calendar, in the 1662 Prayer Book; its first proper reintroduction, with collect and readings, was in the American Episcopal Prayer Book of 1886; thereafter it reappeared in the Scottish Episcopal Prayer Book in 1929, and has experienced wider Anglican (and other support); Ramsey, *The Glory of God*, p. 143.

³⁸ See Stevenson, *Rooted in Detachment*, pp. 146–57.