



Second Sunday of Lent (16 March 2014)

Readings for Sunday: Gen 12:1-4a; Ps 33; 2 Tim 1:8b-10; Matt 17:1-9

Theme: Jesus, the Law and the Prophets

Perhaps the most insidious (and, sadly, longstanding) trend in Christian interpretation of the Gospels has been the tendency to oppose Jesus to His own Jewish faith, as if He were something of a “proto-Christian”. Often, Christian preachers and writers have spoken as if Jesus effectively rejected Judaism and its leadership. Even some contemporary “progressive” theologians speak as if Jesus’ mission was, effectively, to distance Himself from a Jewish religion which is portrayed as oppressive and burdensome, whose leaders were haughty and cruel, and whose religious practices were superficial, hypocritical and devoid of authentic religiosity. The effort to “exalt” Jesus (and, by extension, Christianity) has often been achieved by simultaneously attempting to “put down” Judaism and the Old Testament. Perhaps its most extreme expression was in the ideas of the second-century Christian writer Marcion of Sinope, who argued that the God presented in the New Testament was entirely different from (and *contrary to*) the God described in the Old Testament—and that Christians should, therefore, reject the Old Testament (and certain books of the New Testament which Marcion judged “too Jewish”). Fortunately, the Church forcefully condemned Marcion’s ideas as heretical, and he was excommunicated around the year 144. However, his ideas have had a long-lasting influence in Christianity, and continue to surface in every generation. In an important address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in April 1997, Pope John Paul II said:

Since the second century A.D., the Church has been faced with the temptation to separate the New Testament completely from the Old, and to oppose one to the other, attributing to them two different origins. The Old Testament, according to Marcion, came from a god unworthy of the name because he was vindictive and bloodthirsty, while the New Testament revealed a God of reconciliation and generosity. The Church firmly rejected this error, reminding all that God’s tenderness was already revealed in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, the Marcionite temptation is making its appearance again in our time. However what occurs most frequently is an ignorance of the deep ties linking the New Testament to the Old, an ignorance that gives some people the impression that Christians have nothing in common with Jews. Centuries of reciprocal prejudice and opposition have created a deep divide which the Church is now endeavoring to bridge, spurred to do so by the Second Vatican Council’s position. The new liturgical Lectionaries have given more space to Old Testament texts, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been concerned to draw constantly from the treasures of Sacred Scripture. (Full text at: <http://tinyurl.com/Indz476>)

There are probably *many* messages that Matthew seeks to communicate in this Sunday’s account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. But one of them certainly seems to be *the fundamental compatibility of Jesus with the message and thrust of the Old Testament*—and, by extension, the history and faith of His own Jewish people. Here, on the mountain (traditionally Mount Tabor, but actually unnamed), Jesus appears side-by-side with, and in conversation with, Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures of the Hebrew Scriptures (traditionally seen as symbolic embodiments of the *Torah* and the *Nevi'im*, the Law and the Prophets). Here, they are speaking, not as enemies, but as friends and discussion-partners—stressing (especially for Matthew) the profound compatibility of Jewish and the sacred texts of His people. Jesus is not *rejecting* the Law and the Prophets; on the contrary, He is pointing to the fundamental continuity of His message with God’s earlier revelation, throughout the history of the people of Israel. Even St. John Chrysostom (whose preaching was often painfully anti-Jewish) says of this scene: “[Jesus] brought before them those who shone conspicuously in two ways: for Moses had given the Law, and Elijah was zealous for the glory of God, on account of which neither would have stood near Jesus if He had been opposed to God and to His Law ... Thus he also signified the connectedness of the New and Old Testaments” (*Homily 56 on Matthew*, as quoted in St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Catena Aurea*).

There is much to say about the Transfiguration, but at least one of the important messages it communicates is that it is wrong, inaccurate (and actually *un-Christian!*) to artificially oppose Jesus to the Jewish Scriptures, and to the Jewish faith which flows from them. Matthew’s Gospel in particular seeks to underscore that Jesus is *not* some sort of Jewish “iconoclast,” come to overthrow or jettison the traditional faith of His people; on the contrary, He cautions His disciples (and us!): “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). Whatever the differences between Judaism and Christianity today (and those differences do exist), we cannot use Jesus as a “wedge” to separate our two traditions, or to diminish Judaism in order to raise up Christianity. To do so is contrary to more than fifty years of official Church teachings—and, it would seem, runs contrary to the teaching and example of Jesus Himself, as the account of the Transfiguration very eloquently reminds us.

For Reflection and Discussion: (1) In what contexts have you experienced people or groups “opposing” Jesus to Judaism or the Old Testament? Is “the ghost of Marcion” still alive in some Christian circles? (2) How can we help our Christian brothers and sisters to better understand the relationship of continuity and compatibility between both Testaments in our Bible?

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Questions, comments and feedback are always welcome.

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