

The Transfiguration in the Theology of St. Maximos the Confessor

*The following was given as a talk at the recent conference on St Maximos organised by the St Theosevia Centre in Oxford. In view of our Summer Conference (and Summer School) taking place around the Feast of the Transfiguration, it seemed particularly appropriate to our Fellowship. Our thanks are due to Dr Andrew Louth for providing us with the written version. His recent book, **Maximus the Confessor**, will be reviewed in the next issue.*

There are a number of reasons for devoting some time to considering St Maximos' understanding of the Transfiguration of the Lord. First, because it is important to him, as I hope to show without any difficulty. Secondly, because I think it is an instructive way of approaching Maximos' theology. Although Maximos has a highly coherent vision of God and the cosmos, the Fall, Redemption and Deification, he makes very little attempt to present it systematically, and it seems to me that we run the risk of misrepresenting his whole approach to theology if we try to supply what might be lacking - viz. a systematic structure. It seems to me that what is characteristic of Maximos' approach to theology is his tendency to work out his ideas in relation to specific images, or, if you like, icons: he presents a series of considerations focused on a particular image or icon. Instead of arguing in a logical form from stated principles (though he is quite up to this theological method when it seems to be necessary - often in polemical contexts), Maximos seems to prefer to unfold images and concepts; and sometimes his thought seems to me to move laterally rather than logically. Too often Maximos' works are chopped up into paragraphs, establishing various points, which are then rearranged according to the ideas of his interpreter. Rather Maximos should, I think, be approached meditatively, though this by no means excludes sustained intellectual concentration, and careful attention, when necessary, to definition of terms and clarity of argument.

A further point, rather at the back of my mind, though I am sure that it is an influence on the way I approach Maximos, is that the Transfiguration came to have enormous significance for hesychasm; on the Transfiguration are focused themes like the distinction between God's essence and his energies, the involvement of the whole human person in the contemplation of God, the way in which beholding the transfigured Lord is itself an experience of transfiguration - in fact the nature of spiritual experience itself. It seems to me that Maximos is on a theological trajectory that leads to hesychasm or Palamism, and that this is clear in his treatment of the Transfiguration: those of you who know of the literature on Maximos over the last twenty-five years or so will also know that such a claim is not uncontroversial.

Maximos treats the mystery of the Lord's Transfiguration explicitly on three occasions (if anyone knows of any more, I would be eager to learn of them). They all come in works that belong to Maximos' monastic life, when his concerns seem to have been primarily ascetic and metaphysical, before he committed himself to the struggle for Christological orthodoxy that ended in his suffering and death as a confessor. In that latter period, it may be remarked here, it is not the Transfiguration around which Maximos' thoughts and meditations revolve, so much as the mystery of the Agony in the Garden.

The first is in a work called, misleadingly, *Questions and Doubts (Quaestiones et Dubia)*. It should really be called *Questions and Answers*. This is one of Maximos' favourite genres of theology: responding to questions put to him by one of his friends. His two greatest works, *Questions to Thalassios* and his two-part *Ambigua*, are both examples. The one just called *Questions and Answers* is an early work, probably dating back to his time at the Monastery of St George at Kyzikos, that is before 626. It has recently been published in a critical edition. [1] In this version there are 195 questions and answers, and questions 191 and 192 are devoted to the Transfiguration.

The first of these begins with the discrepancy between the Gospels about when the Transfiguration took place: whether after six days, as in Matthew and Mark, or after eight days, as in Luke. The six days indicate the six days of creation, so that after six days signifies passing beyond the created order as it appears to our senses. Luke's

eight days include a beginning and an end: 'the first day in which the Lord spoke and the last of the Transfiguration'.^[2] But both are taken up in the spiritual interpretation which is:

"Since man through transgression has been reduced to a state opposed to nature, it is necessary that one who wants to ascend by the Word to the mount of theology first, as it were on one day, passes beyond what is opposed to nature, that is the eighth, for this underlies time and characterises the state that is to come."

In this Maximos affirms what seems to me one of the basic principles of his theology, viz., the integrity of the natural, that has been established by God: our normal state, fractured by the Fall of man, is unnatural, and redemption and asceticism are concerned to restore a natural state.

Maximos then passes to the apostles, Peter, James and John, before whom the Lord was transfigured. They signify the three virtues of faith, hope and love. His explanation of how John signifies love is worth citing, as it draws out the point just made about nature:

"John is interpreted as love, and through this love is manifest, since gentleness is nothing other than motionlessness of anger or desire towards what is contrary to nature, and one who comes to anger neither through desires nor through the failure of desire clearly loves everyone."

Maximos then goes on to consider the Transfiguration itself:

"The Word then leads up on to the mountain of theology those who possess faith, hope and love and is transfigured before them, so that to call him God is no longer to affirm that he is holy, king and suchlike, but to make denial of him according to the fact that he is beyond God and beyond holy and that everything is said of him transcendentally."

As it stands, what Maximos seems to be doing is assimilating the ascent of Mount of the Transfiguration - Mount Tabor - to Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, as interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses*, but especially by Dionysios the Areopagite in his *Mystical Theology*. In this ascent - affirmation - kataphatic - theology is left behind and replaced by negative - apophatic - theology. Maximos possibly hints at something else when he goes on to remark that 'the face of the Word, that shone like the sun, is the characteristic hiddenness of his being', but he does not develop it. He passes on to consider the body of Christ and the garment that became white in the Transfiguration. The body refers to 'the substance of the virtues', and the garment to the words of Scripture, or to the works of the cosmos: its whiteness means that to those who have ascended to contemplation of Christ both the words of Scripture and the works of the cosmos become transparent, and their beauty is revealed.

The next question follows on from this and considers the meaning of the three tents Peter thought should be set up. They signify, Maximos thinks, the three stages of Christian life.

These two early questions are relatively brief: only about two-and-a half pages. The next treatment of the Transfiguration we can find in St Maximos occurs in the longest of his *Ambigua*, the tenth, and forms the centre of gravity of that long and fascinating *quaestio*. It comes in the early *Ambigua*, and so dates to the very beginning of his African stay: say, 628-30. The central thread of this *Ambigua* concerns what is meant by passing-over - *diabari*. Maximos tackles this question from a bewildering variety of perspectives, including a long list of examples from the Old Testament, which culminate in the Transfiguration.

His treatment of the Transfiguration (*Amb.* 10,17:1125D-1128D) begins by focusing on the face: this is the heart of the event, as it is the natural focus in any icon of the Transfiguration. The radiance from the face signifies Christ's divinity, and that divinity dazzles - it both reveals and blinds. Maximos then moves quickly to the reason why he has evoked the Transfiguration in *Ambiguum* 10: in the Transfiguration the disciples passed over from seeing Christ as 'without form or beauty' (Isa. 53:2) to seeing him as 'fair with beauty beyond the sons of men' (Ps. 44:3). He interprets this as a passing-over from understanding Christ primarily as the 'Word made flesh' to understanding him as the 'One in the beginning, with God, and God' - a passage from the end of the Johannine

prologue to its beginning, so to speak. Again, he says, as in the *Questions and Answers*, that this movement is a movement of apophasis, negation or denial: and this movement of apophasis they have learnt from the blinding radiance of the face of the Transfigured Lord. He then moves on to interpret the whitened garment of Christ, which he takes as referring to the words of Scripture or to creation itself. He is then led into a long digression in which he expounds the parallelism of Scripture and cosmos. The cosmos is like a book, and the Bible is like the cosmos: both consist of words, *logoi*, which, though diverse, when read with understanding form a single harmonious whole, the meaning of which is the mind of God himself. Maximos insists very strongly on the absolute equivalence of the written law and the natural law: the written law does not mark an advance on the natural law, it simply reveals what has been obscured as a result of the Fall. [3]

The idea of the cosmos and Scripture as mutually implying each other - an idea that extends both to what they mean and how we are to understand them - is central to Maximos' thought: he returns to it in the introductory chapters to his *Mystagogia* (ch. 7).

After a long discussion (covering much else as well as the mutuality of the written and the natural law), Maximos returns to the Transfiguration (*Amb.* 10:31:1160B-1169B). After asserting that in the Transfiguration the disciples came to an understanding of the *logoi* of both Scripture and creation - the words of Scripture and the meanings of the created order - Maximos goes on to explore further the two sides of the Transfiguration, symbolised by the two figures who appeared with Jesus: Moses and Elijah. First he produces a series of ten pairs symbolised by the two men. Moses and Elijah symbolise both the legal word and the prophetic word; wisdom and kindness; knowledge and education; activity and contemplation (note that the symbolism is reversed from that found in *Questions and Answers*); marriage and celibacy; life and death (not at all clear to me); living to God and putting to death the passions (maybe an explanation of the former); how both legal and prophetic word are fulfilled in the transfigured Word; time and nature (a long and fascinating comparison); the *logos* of the world perceived through the senses, subject to change and corruption, and the *logos* of the intelligible world, which God has made imperishable (and with a beginning beyond human understanding). The first thing that strikes one is that Elijah seems to have a shifting significance. Whereas Moses constantly refers to the written law, or to Scripture as a whole, Elijah seems to shift between signifying nature and the natural law and signifying the prophet as the precursor, the one who is closer to fulfilment and directs others there. It is almost as if the natural has become the eschatological. After these follow a further seven interpretations (Maximos calls them contemplations or, in this context, meditations). The first of these (1165B-D) is an exposition of the difference between apophatic and kataphatic theology, in very Dionysian terms. The next provides what can only be described as Chris

Note that what he grants to humankind he grants for the sake of the whole creation. The next meditation affirms the primacy of apophatic theology in Christological terms: 'the light from the face of the Lord, therefore, conquers the human blessedness of the apostles by a hidden apophatic theology'. Three meditations then expound kataphatic theology in terms of the cosmic dimension of the Word made flesh: kataphatic theology is concerned with divine activity, providence and judgement. These three form a triangle with activity - the creative activity of the word - as the apex; providence and judgement, symbolised by Moses and Elijah, concern the way in which divine love draws humankind back to God. The final meditation concerns the way in which the mysteries in the law and the prophets will find their fulfilment at the end of time, an end already foreshadowed in Christ's Paschal mystery.

Maximos returns to the Transfiguration for the last time (so far as I am aware) in his *Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation*. This is generally dated 630-4: a little later than the early *Ambigua*, though not by very much. It is rather different in form to either of the two works already referred to: a *Century* was a monastic genre, consisting of paragraphs or sentences for reflection arranged in groups of 100. The paragraphs are often quite short, and there is scarcely any room for much more than allusive assertion. The chapters (or paragraphs) I shall deal with all come from the second of these *Centuries*. At the end of II.13 Maximos introduces the Transfiguration as God's manifestation in the form of God: this is in the context of his assertion that there are differences among those who stand before the Lord, and that the Lord appears in different forms 'according to the measure of each person's faith'. The meaning of the Transfiguration is stated very briefly: the Lord's face shines like the sun, his garments appear white, 'that is to say, the words of the Gospel will then be clear and distinct, with nothing concealed'. Moses and Elijah signify the 'more spiritual' *logoi* of the law and prophets.

Chapter 15 makes two points: first, the eschatological reference of the Transfiguration, and secondly, an affirmation that the glory of the *logoi* of the law and the prophets will be manifest 'according to the actual receptive capacity of those to whom it is revealed', a point already made with reference to the glory of the Lord himself. Maximus then says that initiation into the '*logoi* of the monad' entails understanding of the *logoi* of providence and judgement joined with it. This triad lies behind Peter's suggestion of three tents, though these are separately explained in terms of the three stages of salvation: virtue, knowledge and theology, which are typified by Elijah, Moses and the Lord, respectively. Maximus' final remark (curio

If you speak of God affirmatively, by making assertions, then you make the word flesh, for you have no other way of seeing God save as the cause of what can be seen and felt. If you speak of God negatively, by making denials, then you make spirit the word, that is in the beginning God and is with God, not knowing him at all from any of the things that can be known, but truly knowing the one who is beyond unknowing (II.39).

Another of these chapters also seems to relate closely to the idea expressed in his exposition of the Transfiguration here, that the Word made flesh is manifest in different ways to different people:

The Word of God is called flesh not only inasmuch as he became flesh. For inasmuch as God the Word is understood simply in the beginning with God and the Father, he possesses clear and naked types of the truth concerning the universe, and does not contain parables and enigmas, nor allegories that need interpretation. But when he comes to dwell among men who cannot approach naked intelligible realities with the naked intellect, he selects things that are familiar to them, and putting together a variety of stores and enigmas and parables and dark sayings, he becomes flesh. Thus at its first encounter our intellect comes into contact not with the naked Word, but with the Word made flesh, that is, with the variety of sayings and stories. Being Word by nature, he has become flesh to the sight, so that most people think that they see flesh and not the Word, although he is truly the Word. This mind of Scripture is not what appears to most people but is other than what it seems. For the Word becomes flesh in each of his recorded sayings (II.60).

I cannot help feeling that in the *Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation*, we find something more redolent of Origen than what we find in the *Ambigua*, or even in *Questions and Answers*, is emphasis on the chameleon-like nature of the Word made flesh is a point to which Origen returns most often in his own interpretations of the Transfiguration,[4] and the suggestion that there is a truth deeper than the Word made flesh, is archetypically Origenist. But it is perhaps wrong to make too summary a judgement: the chapters are brief and allusive, and were intended to be interpreted in a living context now lost to us (historically, at least). Further points of Maximus' more considered interpretation of the Transfiguration, especially his grasp of its cosmic significance, seen in the way he sees this event as summing up the meaning of the *logoi* both in Scripture and creation, as well as the way in which he focuses Dionysios' abstract distinction between apophatic and kataphatic theology on the reality of the Incarnation, should warn us against seeing too great a difference between his doctrine here and in the *Ambigua*.

What to say by way of conclusion? It seems to me that in his treatment of the Transfiguration there is a kind of summing-up of a good deal of Maximus' theological vision: there is the intertwining of Evagrius and Dionysian themes, that we find elsewhere: the Dionysian theme of apophatic theology is focused on the person, or the face, of Christ - this link between the apophatic and the personal is something I have argued we can find elsewhere in Maximus; but the apophatic is set in a cosmic context which is expounded in the kataphatic theology that is undergirded by the apophatic theology, and what is expounded in kataphatic theology is moulded by themes drawn from Evagrius. But finally, it seems to me significant that it is in a kind of icon that all this is drawn together: at the centre there is an encounter, not a concept.

Andrew Louth

Notes:

[1] J.H. Declerk (CCSG 10, 1982).

[2] Note the rather different interpretation provided by St John Damascene in his sermon on the Transfiguration, where six is a perfect number and eight is a type of the age to come (*Trans.* 8).

[3] On this see Paul Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor: An Investigation of His Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (Indiana 1991).

[4] As emerges clearly from the passages from Origen translated by John McGuckin in his *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity*, 9 (The Edward Mellen Press: Lewiston, NY/Queenston, Ontario 1987) pp. 151-64.