Opening address by the Prior of Bose

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The Transfiguration is the mystery of transformation: our body and this creation are invited to transfigure, to become “other”

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The Gospel of the Transfiguration:
A Biblical Spiritual Exegesis

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Introduction.
The Account of the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels

The account of the Transfiguration of Jesus in three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mk 9.2-10; Mt 17.1-9; Lk 9.28-36) occupies a central position which signals a decisive turning point from the ministry of Jesus in Galilee to his ascent to Jerusalem. To be more precise, the account comes in an identical sequence of events in the three Gospels: Peter’s confession (Mk 8.27-30 et par), first announcement of the passion and of the prerequisites for following Jesus (Mk 8.31-38 et par), transfiguration, second announcement of the passion (Mk 9.30-32 et par).

In the fourth Gospel, the event of the Transfiguration is absent, but this entire Gospel is a revelation of the glory of Jesus, from the manifestation of his glory at Cana (Jn 2.1-12) to his glorification on the Cross (Jn 12.23-38; 17.1; etc), to such a degree that already in the foreword the evangelist can attest “and we beheld his glory”(Jn 1.14). One should not forget that this event is also recorded in detail in the writings of the Apostles (the only other similar case being the Last Supper), to be precise in Peter’s Second Letter, which invites us to discern in the Transfiguration an anticipation of the *parousia*, of the coming in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1.16-19).

The intention of the Synoptic Gospels and Peter’s Letter is that the event of the Transfiguration should be read and contempated as an historical event, that is to say as an event which took place in historical time, in the life of Jesus, in front of witnesses for whom it had a decisive significance and who proceeded to recount it: in other words it is not a myth nor a sort of Christian *midrash*! Certainly exegists find it difficult to determine the literary genre: apocalyptic vision? divine theophany? messianic enthronement? re-reading of the transfiguration of Moses (Ex 34.29-35)? It is true that the account cannot be contained within the limits of one literary genre and remains an interpretation of an event which really happened within the life of Jesus and which is included and expressed in a different manner in each of the three Gospels. Their intention is to provide testimony on Jesus which will help readers in their path of paschal faith: for them the Transfiguration is Revelation, it is like lifting the veil from Jesus so that the disciples see the true identity of the Lord.

I would simply like to reflect on this Gospel account, this burning bush in which God reveals his person; I shall attempt to contemplate and read according to the teachings of Origen, the garments of Christ, which are the words of the Gospel, invoking the Holy Spirit so that it may make these garments resplendent and as white as the light (*Comment on Matthew* XII,38 [on Mt 17.2]).

1. The Transfiguration as revelation of the Kingdom of God.

The Transfiguration is an event prophesied by Jesus, who after the first announcement of his passion-death-resurrection told his disciples: “Verily I say unto you that there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power” (Mk 9.1; cf Mt 16.28; Lk 9.27). Some disciples therefore are destined to a vision before their death, and will see during their terrestrial life the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mk and Lk), will see the coming of the Son of man (Mt). Like the Elder Symeon who had obtained from the Holy Spirit “that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Lk 2.26), some receive a similar promise from Christ himself: the Kingdom of God, which Matthew identifies with the Son of Man, that is with Christ himself, will be shown to them. Jesus is the Kingdom of God in person, he is the autobasileia, the self-same Kingdom, as Origen well understood (*Commentary on Matthew* XIV 7, 10.7 [on Mt 18.23]).

Six days (Mk and Mt) or 8 days (Lk) after these words were spoken, “Jesus taketh with him Peter and James and John and leadeth them up into a high mount apart by themselves”(Mk 9.2). He makes a choice, out of the twelve he selects

and takes them with him only three, those that were among the first to be called to follow him (cf. Mk 1.16-20). They are the three disciples most close to Jesus, those who had already been invited to witness the resurrection of the daugther of Jairus (cf. Mk 5.37-43), those who will also witness the de-figuration of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, on the eve of his passion (cf. Mk 14.32-42). They are selected not for particular virtue or merit, but in the inscrutable will of God, so that they may render testimony, become witness of Jesus, witnesses par excellence: Peter will be "a witness (*martys*) of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker (*koinonos*) of the glory that shall be revealed" (1 Pet 5.1); James and John will drink from the cup and will be baptised, according to the promise made by Jesus (cf. Mk 10.38-39). They will be witnesses and therefore martyrs!

It is they whom Jesus took with him, who went with him on the high mountain, the mountain of the revelation of God, which ever since the 2nd century AD (cf. *Gospel of the Hebrews*, cited by Origen in *Homilies on Jeremiah*, XV 4.21) is identified with Mount Thabor, mentioned also in Psalm 89.13. If this ascent on the mountain echos all the accounts of Epiphany, of the revelation of God in the Old Testament: mounts Sinai and Horeb, which are one and the same mountain (cf. Ex 3.1) where Moses ascented and descented (cf. Ex 19-34) and Elijah (cf. 1Kings 19.1-18); "the mountain of the Lord's house exalted above the hills" (Isa 2.2; Mic 4.21)…

Therefore this ascent, which Mark and Matthew emphasize that it is directed to a "mountain apart" (cf. Mk 9.2; Mt 17.1) while Luke specifies that its purpose was prayer (cf. Lk 9.28), happens in view of an important event, in which the disciples will enjoy a revelation prepared by God, a revelation which concerns their Master, whom Peter had confessed a little earlier as Christ Messiah (cf. Mk 8.29 et par). And while Jesus was praying, "he was transfigured" (divine passive form *metemorphothe*: Mk 9.2; Mt 17.2), underwent a change of form in garments and body. Luke, fearing that the readers of the Gospel will perceive this event as a myth, as a metamorphosis in the manner of Greek pagan rites, prefers a more neutral expression: "the fashion of his countenance was altered" (heteros Lk 9.29). We note here how the event is truly inexpressible and how the language of the Gospels is inadequate: Matthew says that "his raiment was white as the light", Mark describes the garments as "shining, exceeding white so as no fuller on earth can white them", Luke defines them "glistering". The three accounts attempt therefore to describe the light of these garments, having surely in mind that light is the garment that envelops God (cf. Ps 104.2); in truth, however, the source of this light is Jesus himself: this is why the body of Christ was transfigured (Mk and Mt), his countenance shone like the sun (Mt) and the fashion of his countenance was altered (Lk).

In place of the everyday human body and face of Christ as the disciples knew it, the change allows an altered face to be seen, a luminous face, a face transfigured by a power which could only be divine. If Paul confessed in the hymn in the Letter to the Philippians:

Who, being in the form of God (*en morphe Theou*)
Thought it not robbery
To be equal with God;
But made himself of no reputation
And took upon him the form of a servant (*morphe doulou*)
And was made in the likeness of man:
Being found in fashion as a man (Phil. 2.6-7)

in the Transfiguration, he who had taken up the form of a servant takes upon him his Godly form and shines with divine light. Origen had noted how the Transfiguration echos the abovementioned passage. He writes:

You wish to know whether the disciples, when Jesus was transformed before those he had led to the mountain, saw Jesus in the form of God, which he had before, having taken up on earth the form of a servant? Well, listen to these words, if you are able, in a spiritual sense and note that it is not said solely that he was transfigured but that "he was transfigured before them" as St Matthew and St Mark say. You will then reach the conclusion that it is possible that he was transfigured before some and before others not. (*Commentary on Matthew*, XII 37.1-21 [on Mt 17.2]).

Something of the glory, of the light of God is resplendent in Jesus, as far as the disciples were able to see: Jesus appears in the form of one of the "righteous shining forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (cf. Mt. 13.43), as he himself had revealed; appears as one of the holy wise men who "shall shine in the firmament as stars for ever and ever" (Dan 12.3). What happens therefore is a true Christophany, a theophany such as those recounted in the Old Testament for Moses (cf. Ex 3.1-15; 34.5-28), Elijah (cf. 1Kings 19.1-18) and other prophets, notably Isiah (cf. Isa 6) and Ezekiel (Ezek 1).

2. Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets.

When the Transfiguration of Jesus took place, in some manner "the heavens opened" (cf. Mk 1.10 et par) and Moses and Elijah appeared and they were talking with Jesus (Mk 9.4 et par).

Moses the Law-giver, and therefore the Law, is named more than once in the Synoptic Gospels precisely in relation to the Law (cf. Mk 1.44; 7.10; etc), but only here does he appear in person. In the high mount of Sinai-Horeb Moses was granted a number of theophanies, and because of his intimacy with God he had received as a gift the luminous countenance which the sons of Israel could not bear to behold (cf. Ex 34.29-35). He was probably the prophet awaited for at the end of days, when – according to the Poem of the Four Nights at Targum in Exodus 12.42 – when he ascended to the mount, while the Messiah King descended from on high. Moses was therefore expected in the messianic times, when a prophet similar to him would have risen, to whom the holy people of Israel would have to listen: " The Lord thy

God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken" (Deut 18.15). But Moses was also who had beseeched God: "Show me thy glory!" (Ex 33.18) and heard God reply: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live…thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen" (Ex 33.20-23). In the event of the Transfiguration, Moses is present, living in the world of God, and finally sees Jesus Christ, the glory of God, who at that time appeared as "the glory of the God invisible"(cf. Heb 1.3), the "Lord of Glory"(1Cor. 2.8), whose face "shines with the splendour of the glory of God" (cf. 2Cor 4.6).

It is Elijah who appears next to Moses; Elijah, the prototype of prophets, who also ascended on a mount for a revelation "in a still small voice" (1Kings 19.12), who was also expected in the end of days "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Mal 3.23), before "The 'Sun of Justice' in whose rays lies salvation rises for those who fear the Name of God" (cf. Mal 3.20; cf. also Sir 48.10-11). Elijah is a representation and synthesis of all the prophecies in the Old Testament, those that were concluded by John the Baptist, who was also seen and identified as a "new Elijah" (cf. Mt 11.14; 17.10), a precursor of Christ in life, in preaching the Kingdom to come, in witnessing and in violent death.

Mose and Elijah, the Law and the prophets who are a synthesis of all the Scriptures of Israel, the First Testament, stand next to Jesus as witnesses and interpreters. Indeed, in their "talking together" (*sunlalein* cf. Mk 9.4) with Christ they show an authentic spiritual interpetation being enacted: Jesus is the interpreter of the Law and of the prophets, who "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24.27); Moses and Elijah, defined by Luke as "two men", are they who will be present at the empty tomb, will interpret the words said by Jesus during his life and will proclaim him Crucified and Risen (cf. Lk 24.4-7). It is in this perspective that Luke specifies that Moses and Elijah "spake with Jesus of his decease (*elegon ten exodon autou*) which he should accomplish in Jerusalem" (Lk 9.31). The Law and the prophets therefore bear witness to the *necessitas passionis*, the necessity of Christ's passion, they indicate him as the Servant of the Lord who must go through kenosis to exhaltation, and in this way they show the continuity of faith between Old and New Alliance.

The messianic expectations of Israel are now truly fulfilled, and Jesus Messiah appears as the living exegesis and true fulfilment of the Scriptures. It is with this conviction that Origen notes:

If one understands and contemplates the Son of God transfigured to a point where his face is like the sun and his garments white as the light, one will see, contemplating Jesus in the manner, Moses the Law and Elijah, who is not simply one prophet but represents all prophets, while they converse with Jesus…And if one has seen the glory of Moses having perceived that the spiritual Law is one and the same with the word of Jesus, and having perceived that in the prophets "wisdom is concealed in mystery" (1Cor 2.7), then one has seen Moses and Elijah in glory, seen them together with Jesus (*Commentary on Matthew*, XII 38.29-37; 43-49 [on Mt 17.2-3]).

How can one forget the mosaic in San Apollinare in Classe at Ravenna, where Moses and Elijah stand on each side of the glorious cross, whereas beneath the cross there are three sheep representing the witnesses to the Transfiguration? In this mosaic Jesus is represented by the cross, the subject of the conversation between Moses and Elijah; it is truly an extraordinary figurative and highly theological representation!

And just so as to make this vision become full reality, "Peter answered and said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for thee, and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Mk 9.5). He thought perhaps that the end of days had arived? He thought perhaps of the tents of the feast of Sukkoth, a feast full of eschatological connotations? He thought perhaps of setting up for Jesus, Moses and Elijah the tent Moses built to meet the God (cf. Ex 33.7-11)? In any case, Peter, James and John "do not know how to respond" to this event nor to that at Gethsemane – note that the same expression is used in Mk 8.6 (*ouk edei ti apokrithe*) and 14.40 (*ouk edeisan ti apokrithosin*)! – and are struck with fear by the revelation that was destined for them, the same fear experienced by the women on Easter morning (cf. Mk 16.5-8).

3. The Cloud of the Spirit and the Voice of the Father.

While Peter is talking, there comes "a cloud that overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud saying: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him!" (Mk 9.7). In the background of the account there is always the account of the theophany accorded to Moses on Mount Sinai: on the high mount there was a cloud which overshadowed it (cf. Ex 19.16; 20.21; 24.15; etc), a cloud which is a symbol of the Presence of God, a sign that God has descended, has reached out to humans, yet always remaining concealed, Holy, separated from the world. This cloud, which on the mountain indicated the House of God (cf. the verb *shakan*, whence *Shekinah*), came to the tabernacle constructed by Moses in the desert (cf. Ex 40.34-35) and at the time of the dedication of the Temple, filled the Holy of Holies (cf. 1Kings 8.10-12). This cloud therefore is the Presence of God, which is seen by rabbinic tradition as Presence through the Holy Spirit, is the self-same glory of God. The Entry hymn in Latin Mass justly says: "The Holy Spirit appeared in a luminous cloud and the voice of the Father resounded"…

In the event of the Transfiguration, the Shekinah comes to testify that God is present and overshadows the persons present at the event. We are faced with an oxymoron: it is "a luminous cloud" specifies Matthew, and yet it overshadows (cf. Mt 17.5); Matthew's specification will be dear to Christian tradition as definition of consciousness and vision of God… This therefore is the answer to the words of Peter: not three tabernacles made by men, but one cloud, the Shekinah of God. This is the ultimate and definitive truth: no more a tabernacle, no more a Temple, no more a Holy of Holies, but rather the *Shekinah*, the House-Presence of God in Jesus Christ, who is House, temple and Presence! According to the fourth Gospel, Jesus will tell the Samaritan woman: "Woman, the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers

shall worship the Father in spirit (i.e. in the Holy Spirit) and in truth (which is Jesus Christ)" (Jn 4.23)…
From the cloud of the Presence of God here comes the voice of the Father, the word of God himself. Jesus had heard this word of the Father when he was baptised by John the Baptist; then the heavens opened and a voice proclaimed to Jesus alone: "Thou art my Son, the beloved one ("the elect one" according to Lk 3.22) in whom I am well pleased" (Mk 1.11; Mt 3.17). In fact the voice of the Father had repeated then the words said of the Servant of the Lord: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, in whom my soul delighteth"(Isa 42.1), attesting that the Son of God is the Servant of the Lord. Now this is announced to the disciples, among them Peter, who a little earlier had turned to Jesus calling him "Rabbi, Master" (Mk 9.5). He whom the disciples had followed and had become involved in his life, he whom they had heard and seen act like a Master, a Prophet, a Messiah, is revealed by the Father as "Beloved Son" and "Servant of the Lord". Indeed, through the revelation of the Father, Jesus appears at the same time as the enthroned Messiah of Psalm 2 ("thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" Ps 2.7) and as the Servant whom God himself presents to Israel through the prophet Isaiah (cf. Isa 42.1-9).
It is here that the different messianic expectations of Israel meet: the expectation of a royal Messiah, of a prophetic Messiah, of an eschatological Messiah. It is for this reason that the invitation "Hear him!" resounds echoing the words of God in relation to the eschatological prophet (cf. Deut 18.15) and echoing also the *Shema'*: "Hear Israel…" (Deut 6.4). Henceforth hearing God himself is hearing Jesus, the Son, the living Word of God! Moses and Elijah, the Law and the prophets, cede their place to Jesus after having witnessed, because henceforth it is He who is the exegesis of the Father (*exeghesato*: Jn 1.18); it is He, Jesus, who can verily say who God is and preach him, rendering Him as good news to all men; the command "Hear him!" of God the Father means that Jesus is the Logos, the definitive Word…
But the vision disappears and Jesus is once again seen in his humble everyday human nature (cf. Mk 9.8 et par). Then, "while they were descending from the mount, Jesus charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were to rise from the dead" (Mk 9.9). the revelation was extraordinary but must remain under silence, so that the messianic secret may not be unveiled before the time of the resurrection. But the disciples, always prey to their astonishment, to their lack of faith, ask themselves what 'rises from the dead' might mean" (cf. Mk 9.10)…

Conclusion.
The Christological Importance of the Event of the Transfiguration

After this detailed reading of the account of the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels, I would like to conclude by simply making plain its message. First of all, to contemplate the Transfiguration means to understand more profoundly the event of Christ's baptism. The word of God reveals the identity of Jesus: he is the Son of God who has to make his exodus/decease, that is his passion-death-resurrection. At the same time, the event of the Transfiguration announces what will happen in Jerusalem, when at the time of the cross the centurion will confess: "Verily this man is the Son of God!" (Mk 15.39; Mt 27.34). Indeed, the event of the Transfiguration is a memorial of baptism and an oracle of the cross, and the central position assigned to it by the evangelists indicates this very nature of memorial and prophecy, of fulfilment of what was said at baptism and anticipation of what will come in the resurrection and the *parousia*.
But the Transfiguration is also a mystery of light, which illuminates the entire body (Israel and the Church; Moses Elijah and the disciples) together with the Godhead. In fact the First Pact is a testimony and Jesus interprets the First Pact; the disciples in turn will receive Jesus, receive the testimony of the Scriptures and receive the charge of the Father in view of hearing the Son. There is no biblical image more efficient to marrate the unity of faith in the two Testaments, the centrality of Jesus the Messiah, the fullness of the revelation in him, his being one sole body for the faithful who in the Old Testament were waiting for the Messiah and in the New one they confess him and preach him.
Finally, the Transfiguration is the mystery of transformation: our body and this creation are invited to transfigure, to become "other"; our miserable body will become a body of glory (cf. Phil 3.21), and "the creation that groaneth and travileth in pain"(cf. Rom 8.22) will know its transformation into a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21.1). What happened on Mount Thabor in Jesus Christ will happen for all the faithful and for the entire cosmos at the end of history…Waiting for this day, it remains for us to contemplate, as far as we are able, "the face of Christ resplendent with the glory of God" (cf. 2Cor 3.18). in that way, in thy light, Lord, we shall see the light (cf. Ps 36.10)!

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