

SERMON

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B

“IN YOUR GLORY”

JOHN 12:20-33 / MARCH 18, 2018

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus says of himself, “The hour has come for the human one to be glorified.” Glorified. Glory. What is glory? What does it mean to be in your glory? When are *you* in your glory?

If you are a gardener, you might be in your glory at the end of the growing season when you harvest those fresh vegetables you had so painstakingly planted and so carefully looked after. If you are a writer, you might be in your glory when the book you have long researched and then wrote and rewrote is, at long last, finished and then published. If you are a singer, you might be in your glory as, after much devoted practice, you finish your performance and know you nailed it. Or you might be a hockey fan, and when your favourite team wins the Stanley Cup, you will be in your glory. I know I will be!!

When at work or play – when we throw hands up in exhilaration, or jump in sheer jubilation; when the adrenaline begins to flow and the heart pounds – Those observing us will learn much about us. You need to watch us when we are in the middle of glory if you want to know who we really are, what we live for.

The Bible dictionary says that glory (kabat in Hebrew, doxa in new testament Greek) implies “weightiness” and “splendour”. Glory is that which gives you weight, substance, and that which makes you shine. At church we may sing a ‘doxology’ – a hymn that glorifies God. Well, what about Jesus’ glory alluded to in our gospel reading for today?

Some Greeks come wanting to see Jesus. They have perhaps heard of his many signs and wonders. Who is this illustrious worker of miracles? A fairly glorious person, no doubt. They want to witness his glory. “The hour has come for me to be glorified,” Jesus says. Enough of this Galilean, flesh-and-blood, ordinary human being. His disciples, and these Greeks as well, anticipate Jesus throwing off the cloak of humanity to reveal his... glory. But Jesus’ description of his glory is nothing less than shocking. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies.....”

We praise God as the glorious one who is high, exalted, lifted up. Jesus speaks of divine glory as a seed falling to earth, dying. The true glory for Christ is not his exaltation, but his humiliation, his death on a cross.

Traditionally Christians have thought of God’s glory as expressed by certain divine attributes: God on high – eternal, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, incomprehensible. *Doxa. Doxology* -- praising God in all God’s glory. As we sometimes sing: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise God all creatures here below...” Generally speaking, in the long history of the Christian faith, the construction of churches has attempted to express that glory. They were built to be more than a one storey box building. They were built to be immense and grand and, well, *glorious*

structures. And church anthems were not written for the harmonica or the kazoo. We throw up these huge pipes and pull out all the stops on the organ. Glory!

The Greek visitors come saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus – we want to see who is this glorious one come from a glorious God. And they were shown one who spoke of his life as a grain of wheat, dead in the earth, his glory at his death. Those weighted with this world’s glory often revel in the glory of power and wealth and success.

But Jesus reveals a different kind of glory. It is glory to be found in the ordinary, the mundane, even in the most unlikely of places and circumstances and people. The teacher who gives a lifetime to a small rural school; the outreach worker who pours out his or her life in acts of compassion to the marginalized; the single parent who works two jobs so children don’t go without; the nurse who regularly dispenses not only medicine but loving concern; the chorister who gives up every Thursday evening to enrich the experience of worshippers on Sunday morning; the coach who gives up much of the weekend so inner city youngsters can know the joy of organized sport. We sing no doxology to them. But that is where true glory is, says Jesus. The glory of God is always breaking into the midst of the ordinary.

Writer Edgar Moore points out that such glory may be less visible, less noticeable and yet it is glory all the same. He considers the nature of the rainbow in the story of Noah and the ark. This story is one that some Christians feel they need to outgrow as they come to mature faith. The

math, the buoyancy problems, the animal management issues and, frankly, the air quality challenges below decks – makes this account one of those easily consigned to the category of mythic fable.

But a physicist friend of Moore's once remarked regarding the rainbow, this beautiful yet ordinary phenomenon "that the rainbow God summoned up to serve as a covenant sign for Noah was the most sophisticated part of the story. We see only part of the rainbow", he said, "because of the limits of our human visual spectrum. There's much more to the rainbow than we can imagine."

The theme of the limits of ordinary vision runs throughout John's Gospel. In John's third chapter, Jesus tells Nicodemus he'll never see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above. When some Greeks who've come from Jerusalem for Passover tell Philip they wish to see Jesus, the theme surfaces again: human vision, unaided by the refractive grace of the holy spirit, can discern only part of the truth. This is why, when word about these curious Greeks reaches Jesus, he responds with this discourse on glorification that culminates in a prediction of crucifixion: "And, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

To see Jesus as God's son, as messiah, as saviour – is to see through the lens of God's spirit. It is to see what is beyond the immediate, visual spectrum. It is to discern the great purposes of God being worked out in the impending passion, death, and resurrection – the drama John unfolds in his language of glorification.

The Greeks who approached Philip may have wished merely to see Jesus of Nazareth with a 'cover of time magazine' type of glory: man of the year – miracle worker, exemplary orator and story teller, charismatic leader. But John wants us to see through a lens that sees Jesus' glory unfolding in the mundane, ordinary events of life. The church has inherited from John the conviction that perceiving the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in the midst of the ordinary, even in the midst of the underbelly of ordinary life, is foundational to its proclamation of the gospel.

In the ordinary events of life, Jesus' extraordinary glory is revealed; in the meals shared with rich and poor; saint and sinner; in the common experience of sickness and death, in triumph and tragedy, Christ's glory is seen in the stories of miracles, healing, and giving of new life. This is what John means by glorification: not only that Mary's boy, born in Bethlehem, is now revealed by the cross and resurrection, as lord and saviour, but also that the church now understands who and what it must be in response to this revelation.

The church, as in some conservative congregations, is not meant to be a lifeboat to escape earth's present troubles and sufferings;
And the church, as in some liberal congregations, is not meant to be simply a social club or merely a social justice organization; the church is meant to be a receptor and reflector of Christ's glory, to bear that glory – the glory that comes from carrying on his work – indeed sharing his work as the risen Christ – the glory of humility, and of love, a glory that heals, and reconciles and enables new life to happen.

So, when we come looking for Jesus, what we saw surprised us, and still surprises us. In the Christ, we beheld God's countering of this world's glory with a different glory. A glorious golden cross adorns our communion table. He stooped under a cross of wood. We put crowns weighty with gold on those we exalt. His crown was light. Thorns are not weighty. We work, and study, and strive so that we may be weighty enough so as never to be required to stoop to anyone. He enacted glory stooped with basin and towel. We wanted to hail him as king on Palm Sunday. By week's end, he knelt down and washed our tired feet.

We beheld his glory that required us to redefine the weight of glory. His glory is in his stooping down. Not transcendence, but condescendence. He became as a grain of wheat cast to the earth, buried under sod, suffered, died. His glory, his exaltation, was when he finally got the opportunity to be "high and lifted up". But the only time he was lifted up high enough to look down upon us from the heights of glory, was when he looked down at us from his cross. Jesus said, "God, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said it was thunder.

I will conclude with a story that is one portrayal of the nature of this strange glory. Japanese writer, Shusako Endo thought about the pain of God, not the power of God; of God's love; God's condescendence, not God's transcendence which we in the west have so often emphasized. Endo tells a story out of the past. The Jesuits came to Japan in the sixteenth century and there was a mass conversion to the Christian faith. But then came the European traders and their arrogance. As a result, there was a backlash

among the Japanese against the Christians. A persecution of Japanese Christians was begun. In the story, Rodrigus, a Jesuit, has gone to Japan to find out why his most esteemed Japanese teacher has recanted his Christian faith. Now, Rodrigus is a devout man. He spends much time in prayer and contemplation, but his devotional life is obsessed with a terrible problem. Despite his earnest spiritual practices, all of his Bible reading and meditation, he senses nothing of God's presence.

It is as if God has turned away from him. He becomes horrified by the terrible absence of God. It becomes almost unbearable for him. Soon after Rodrigus arrives in Japan, he runs afoul of the authorities who capture him and put him in a small, dark prison cell. While he is there, he thinks he hears snoring coming from nearby. He supposes that it is the snoring of some drunken guards. Then he is told that it is, in fact, the laboured, awful breathing of some former Japanese Christians who have long ago, after torture, apostasized, forsaken their Christian faith, but have nevertheless been hung upside down with their faces half-buried in human excrement. Rodrigus is horrified at the thought of their plight.

So, his captors tell him that they will free these wretched prisoners if Rodrigus will only apostasize. If he will just reject Christ, they will free these people and let them go. His esteemed teacher is one of the prisoners.

They bring Rodrigus out of his cell and present before him a small image of Christ, done in bronze. And all he has to do, he is told, is a mere bureaucratic formality. Just put your toe ever so slightly on the image of Christ and those prisoners will be set free. Rodrigus wants to take that

image, which has been marked by a thousand toes that have trampled upon it; he wants to take it and kiss it. But Rodrigus raises his foot. In it he feels dull, heavy pain. It is for him no mere formality, for he is tempted to trample upon the most beautiful thing in his life, that image of the one to whom he has devoted his life; the one that has taught him all the good and ideals of his life.

And then the Christ in bronze breaks the silence. He speaks to the tormented priest, “trample, trample. I more than anyone know the pain in your foot. I came to be trampled upon. Trample! It was to share your pain that I carried my cross. Put your foot down! Trample on me!” Then Rodrigus put his foot down on the Christ. Far out in the distance, a cock crowed. But some said it was thunder.

Thanks and praise to God whose glory is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and whose glory continues to shine in and through us as we carry on his mission of sacrificial love bringing healing, and new life to the world. Amen.

Major Sources:

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