

Glory – John 12.20-33

I remember my wife Gill returning home from a meeting at the Mothers' Union HQ in London. 'I've just encountered the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen', she exclaimed. 'She's a West Indian girl called Glory and she is the receptionist at Mary Sumner House. It so happened that I was due to go there myself just a few weeks later. I looked forward with eager anticipation to seeing this vision of loveliness. When I arrived, however, I found, much to my disappointment, that Glory had departed.

'Glory' is not a word we use very much today. We come across it most of all in the realm of sport. Yesterday the Six Nations battled it out against each other in exhilarating fashion at rugby union. They were doing more than trying to score more points than the opposition; they were going for glory and it showed in the celebrations of the Ireland team afterwards. Think too of the football player who scores a breathtaking goal. His team mates mob him enthusiastically and then he goes and performs a little dance with the corner flag as he milks the adulation of his fans. He has glorified the beautiful game and he in turn receives the glory due to his athleticism and sporting prowess.

But sport is perhaps the new religion, because glory is really to do with the essential character of God. It refers to his honour and splendour and awesome majesty and power. In the Old Testament God's glory is manifested in earthquake and fire and mighty desert wind. And at the consecration of the temple in an overwhelming cloud of light. The glory of God is the revelation of his divine nature.

In our Gospel reading Jesus said to some Greek seekers after truth: 'The hour has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified', to receive or to exhibit the eternal majesty, power, awesomeness and beauty associated with God. What might we then expect to see of the nature of God in Jesus? Superhuman athleticism and power? Great intellectual wisdom? A leader among leaders? Someone who combines the attributes of Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein and Lionel Messi all in one? You may know this description of him – 'One Solitary Life':

Here is a young man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He did none of those things we usually associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. While he was still a young man the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only possession he had on earth and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed tomb through the pity of a friend.

Two hundred years before the time of Christ the prophet Daniel had written of a glorious figure who would come down to earth from God:

‘I looked and there before me was one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples of every language worshipped him.’ (Daniel 7.13-14)

So when Jesus, having just entered Jerusalem like a king, like a messiah, says in the temple; ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’ then people’s hearts must have missed a beat. Could this be the moment the whole nation has been waiting for? Is this Son of Man God’s special envoy, the super heavenly being vested in the power of God himself, who would smash the infidels and forge a new world empire with Jerusalem as its capital? For the people of Jerusalem the hour of glory would be the hour of victory. But for Jesus the hour of glory, when he would reveal God’s essential divine character and power, would be the hour when he gave up all in self surrender, self sacrifice – his death on a cross.

In the last verse of our Gospel passage Jesus says: ‘When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself., And John comments, lest we misunderstand: ‘He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die’. Jesus would be lifted up, not like a champion on the shoulders of his fans, but on a gibbet as a public spectacle, utterly humiliated in the ugliness of this awful execution.

Jesus explains the divine paradox of the glory of God. Glory is revealed in and through suffering sacrifice. This will be true in him. It will be true for his followers. It is true in life. He gives a simple agricultural illustration:

Verily I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it does die it bears much fruit’.

One grain of wheat can appear hard and dead, and so it is if it remains above ground. But if you plant it in the earth, bury it as if it is indeed dead, then a miracle of life takes place. Moisture softens the husk, roots and shoot push out from the seed and..... By harvest time you have, say, 40 grains of wheat. Plant these the following year and the one grain has now become 1600. The next year 64,000. Four years on 2,560,000. And in the fifth year over 100 million grains of wheat. Eventually there is bread for the world. How splendid, how wonderful, how beautiful, how – glorious!

Life comes through death. Jesus explains what this means in human terms:

‘Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’

Let me put this in slightly different language. We are by natural inclination self-centred, at least to some degree; egocentric is the post-Freudian term to use. We

have an inherent urge towards self-preservation, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, self-glorification.

Many years ago now, there was a series of correspondence in the Times newspaper under the heading 'What's Wrong with the World?' Various erudite and distinguished people contributed at length. By far the briefest letter, however, was from the author GK Chesterton:

'What's Wrong with the World?
Dear Sirs,
I am,
Yours faithfully
GK Chesterton'

Living like this, says Jesus, we are dead. However, if we hate, not ourselves as people, but if we hate our egocentricity and turn from it, die to it, because it prevents us from being the person God made us to be, then we begin to live eternally.

Jesus does not suggest that such dying to the I AM within us is easy. For him it meant crucifixion, the most painful form of execution ever imagined, and he knew this. 'Now is my soul troubled', he laments, 'and what shall I say – Father, save me from this hour? No. It is for this reason I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your Name.' And so the essential character of God, his eternal majesty and power, his glory is revealed. And it continues to be revealed.

In December 1995 Philip Lawrence was fatally stabbed outside the west London school where he was head teacher. He saw teaching in this tough school as his Christian calling. It was his life, and it became his death. He went out to the school gate to intervene in a gang related fight. He was punched and stabbed in the chest. And he died in hospital that night. He died as he had lived, sacrificing himself for his students. Have you ever wondered what happened to the two boys at the heart of the tragedy? You might expect that the boy whose life Philip Lawrence saved looked at what had happened and thought to himself: 'That man died for me. I've got to change'. But in 2003 he went to jail for carrying a gun at the Notting Hill Carnival. The murderer, though, did change. In prison he learnt to read and write and he took GCSEs. He came out determined to steer youngsters drawn into drugs and gangs away from the way he had gone.

Not many of us pay the ultimate sacrifice but we all of us nearly every day find ourselves in situations where we have the choice of dying to the I AM within and enabling others to live, or of succumbing to the I AM within, thinking that we are living when in God's truth we are dying. But if we die daily, then daily we reveal something of the beauty, the glory, of God.