

John 17:1-11

St Catherine's, 28 May 2017

I'm not, as you may be aware, a professional minister, I'm not ordained, but I do, I hope, have some qualifications to be a preacher. For one thing, I really love the sound of my own voice. Me talking and 50 people listening, I like those odds.

In fact, to be honest, if I think of some of the most glorious moments of my life, I think of winning the public speaking competition in second year high school, beating everyone in my year and turning out to be really good at something for the first time. I tell my sons that today and they say I'm unbelievably sad, but I knew that anyway.

Later in life I did stand up comedy, had some pretty bad nights, but the good ones were glorious. Doing a one hour show, to a big crowd, and them all laughing loud and long in all the right places. Glory days.

When I think of the most glorious moments of my life, those are the kind of things that come to mind. Although reflecting on this morning's Gospel reading, I do wonder if I've got that right.

This is Jesus' last night alive, and he prays: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." The Gospel of John talks a lot about glory. It says Jesus came as a human being so that people would see the glory of God. When Jesus turns water into wine, John says he reveals God glory; and the same when he raises Lazarus from the dead...

But, Jesus keeps looking forward to a climax of glory, saying: the time is coming when he will be lifted up from the earth and that's when he will be really glorified, really reveal the glory of God. And John tells us, that Jesus is referring to the way he will die, on a cross. And now, in today's reading, the climax comes; as he is being betrayed by his friend and arrested, Jesus says: Finally the hour has come; the hour of glory; now Jesus will be glorified, and God will be glorified through him.

And I wonder if that strikes you as strange at all, because it does me. Jesus talks about being betrayed, and crucified, as if that was his idea of glory. John is saying: We glimpsed God's glory when we saw his physical body, his human life; we glimpsed it when he changed water into wine;

we glimpsed it when he raised a man from the dead; and now finally his full glory will be unveiled – in a crucifixion.

Today, we have a pretty good idea what crucifixion looked like – except that the figure in our pictures tends to wear a loin cloth. In reality, people were crucified naked. We might also know that it was a slow and painful way to die. What we might not be so clear on is what crucifixion was about, what it was for.

Crucifixion was not just meant to kill people, though it certainly did, it was meant to be utterly degrading. It was a punishment for defeated enemies of Rome, and a demonstration of how the might of Rome crushes and humiliates its enemies. The victim was strung up naked in public, left to die; then often left to be eaten by crows or their corpse given to dogs. It was illegal to crucify any Roman citizen whatever their crime, because it was too degrading a death. And the Roman writer Cicero said that “the very mention of the cross should be far removed not only from a Roman citizen’s body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears.”

And for a Jewish person crucifixion was even more degrading because the scripture says anyone who is hanged on a tree is cursed by God and is unclean.

Jesus was supposed to be the king sent by God. Only days before his arrest, he rode into Jerusalem and the crowds hailed him as the answer to all their hopes and prayers: ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Then he’s betrayed by his friend, arrested, beaten up, spat on, and raised up on a cross, his bones nailed to wood, naked, wearing a toy crown, with a sign over his head saying: ‘Here’s your king, Jews’.

And John tells us, this is the hour of Christ’s glory.

What kind of glory is this? It’s very strange.

One explanation I’ve heard is that, because Jesus died in obedience to God, then God raised him from the dead, raised him up to heaven, to be crowned and throned in splendour. In which case John is saying that the crucifixion is what Jesus had to get through in order to be glorified.

I'm not entirely convinced by that, partly because that's not what he says here, but also because that's not where John's story goes. At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus does not go up to heaven, is not crowned, does not sit on a throne. Which is not to say that John denies those things – which this morning's reading from Acts talked about, and which the Church celebrated this Thursday on the Feast of the Ascension – but are not part of John's story. The finale is: that Jesus's follower Thomas cannot believe in his resurrection, until Jesus appears to him, presents him with: the injuries of his crucifixion, the wrecked flesh, the breakage and hurt and damage, and that's when Thomas sees his glory and says: 'My Lord and my God'.

The only crown given to Jesus in John's story is the crown of thorns. Jesus is called 'king' in John's Gospel nine times: once at the start by his disciple Nathanael; once by the crowd on Palm Sunday; and seven times during his crucifixion.

This our king. This is his glory.

How do we make sense of this? I wonder. Maybe making sense of it is not so important as hearing the story and letting it sink in. The main thing I want to do is to point you to the mystery of John's story, and say: Did you ever hear such a thing.

But preachers are supposed to explain things, so I will try.

When John talks about the glory of God it's not a brilliance that shines somewhere so distant we would never see it; and it isn't a light that shines down on us from up in heaven; it's light that comes into our darkness, it shines into our lives, a light that is here with us in the gloom and the night.

That is the glorious light we see in the cross, God entering into the brokenness of human life. The glory of the cross is that God is with us. The glory of God is a light that shines with love into the murkiest corners of our lives where we can't even bear to look ourselves. The glory of God is the light that rises in our deepest night of grief and defeat where we can see no hope of day.

And in telling this story, it seems to me, John is turning religion on its head. What everyone knew about God, or the gods, is that you try to get on their right side, and if you do they bring

you victory and prosperity and power and success. That was the expectation of those who worshipped the gods of the Romans or the Greeks or the Egyptians or the Vikings or, in many cases, the God of the Hebrews. We glorify them with praise and sacrifice, they glorify us with wealth and success.

John says they got it all wrong. The glory of God is to enter into the lives of those who are downtrodden, and wounded, and failing to hold it together. The glory of God is not seen in the victorious army or the crown of gold, it is with those who struggle with disability or depression. It does not blaze forth from the seven hills of Rome, but glows around those in the valley of the shadow of death.

This was always who God was, John says, but we never saw it so clearly until he became flesh and entered into the mess of human life, befriending tax cheats and sinners and mentally disturbed sex workers. We saw when he turned the water of religious law into the good wine of grace. We saw it when he hauled the body of his friend out the grave and gave him new life for old. But we saw it perfectly when he was betrayed and defeated and killed, because the light shines in the darkness, God enters our brokenness.

And this – I think John might be saying – is why resurrection works. It's because God enters into our death that he raises us up to life. It's because God enters into our brokenness that he raises it up to wholeness. It's because God enters into our defeat and that he raises it up to victory and deliverance. It's because God enters into our loss and grief that he raises them up to healing and restoration. It's because the light enters into the long night of our souls that the day starts to dawn.

On Thursday, as I said, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, when Jesus, after his resurrection, was up to heaven raised up to heaven; and the theologians of the early Church tell us that when that happened he raised our humanity up into the heavenly places. We, in Christ, are, today, being raised to heaven. But that can happen because first he entered into what we are.

So what were the glory days of my life? What have been the most glorious moments? I suppose, any time I came across someone in a time of need, anyone who wasn't making it on their own, wasn't doing too well, and took part in their life, in the hope that it might help – gave the light an opportunity to shine there. I wish it wasn't so hard to think of examples of when I've done that.

There is room for a lot more glory in my life, and it won't be found standing in front of crowds enjoying the sound of my own voice.

So let me close by praying that the glory of Christ shine in all of our lives. Where we are broken or struggling or defeated may we know God with us. And where it is those around us who are in need, may God's light shine through us. Amen.

Steve Tomkins, 28th May, Easter 7.