

“This is How My Father is Glorified” A Sermon at Union Chapel

21 May 2006

Readings

Psalm 98

Acts 10:44–48

Jn 15:8–17

This is how my Father is glorified: you are to bear fruit in plenty,
and so be my disciples Jn 15:8

There is, in John’s gospel, a lot of talk of glory: no surprise there, we might think, because the whole bible is full of talk of glory. The psalm we heard is a good example; though it doesn’t actually use the word “glory”, it’s full of the concept. But when we actually look at how the word is used in John’s gospel, we find that things are not at all as we might expect. Jesus says “this is how my Father is glorified” – that is, he’s talking about God and about God’s glory, about the glory that Isaiah saw in the temple, about the glory that God had to hide Moses from when he saw it. And Jesus is referring to this glory – the unutterable majesty of God – and saying, “here it is”: saying it, not of himself, but of the disciples bearing fruit. And even when Jesus, in John’s gospel, *does* talk of his own glory, he talks of things which might seem, to us, to be distinctly non-glorious: he talks of his death and crucifixion, which might seem to us to be more shameful than glorious.

But, first, the psalm. We get, right at the beginning, a lot of military imagery: God’s right hand has got him the victory, and we sing praises to God for that. Not only do we sing praises, but we use trumpets and horns (military instruments), and even with the lyre (which might be thought to be more gentle) we are supposed to have “resounding music”. One of

the things which impresses me about temple music in Jerusalem is how loud it must have sounded: we get descriptions of enormous numbers of musicians. They might not have had amplifiers but they did their best.

So, as it seems, bling all round. These are very human emotions: wanting to be seen as important, to be given respect, to have others see that you are favoured, that your God is powerful and looks well on you. And, in the psalm, the “others” are the other nations: it is Israel who is craving respect, who does not want to be put to shame, who wants to be able to say “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God”.

Together with the wish for glory goes the fear of shame. And, correspondingly, the psalms are full of heartfelt cries: “Lord, let me not be put to shame”, lamentations that the writer has been put to shame, and, finally, rather unseemly gloatings that Israel’s enemies have been shamed. All very human: the psalms are full of such humanity.

Now it would be all too easy to think that things were all very primitive in those days, all very Old Testament: that the time of Jesus is marked by altogether more civilised, more subtle, ideas. But this psalm itself proves that wrong: because it ends, not with the triumphant shout of victory that it started with, but with

let the mountains sing aloud together
before the Lord;

for he comes to judge the earth
he will judge the world with justice
and the peoples with equity

Ps. 98:8f

So it is justice and equity – not just power, but wisdom, discernment, creatively making things good – where God’s glory really resides: regardless of the bling, there are good reasons for saying that God is glorious.

When we look at John’s gospel, things are, again, not as we would like to think. There is the usual mixture of human emotions (remember Peter, hiding, not willing to admit, for fear of shame, that he was one of Jesus’ disciples? And the telling phrase that the Pharisees “valued human reputation more than the righteousness which comes from God”? *Those* emotions live on). But we also have Jesus, resolutely and calmly, going up to Jerusalem, knowing that his own victory would not consist in a glorious military spectacle, but in showing, using his own body, what the ruler of this world was up to: by refusing to play this world’s game, but to say, triumphantly, “now is the prince of this world cast down”.

So, throughout the bible, we have these two threads: on the one hand the world of appearance, of seeming, and, on the other hand the world of

justice and equity, the world as seen by a God who does not judge by appearance. The two are always present together in life: it is, of course, truly glorious when things are as they seem, when the outward appearance of attractive and beautiful things really does show a true, inner glory at their heart. And there is nothing wrong with that: it is a difficult thing to achieve, but when it is achieved it can be tremendously healing and reconciling. We run here an arts venue, the Union Chapel Project, and one of the things that I hope that the Project can do, or maybe just ought to aim at, is to encourage the sort of art, the sort of music, which does that sort of healing and reconciling; which says something about the promise of a world in which the outside and the inside would fit together.

But we know full well that life is not all like that. We know that glory – as this world sees it – is normally, and for the most part, far removed from what God sees and how things ought to be. And we have only to look at our other activity here, the Margins homelessness project, to see that: to see people who, as the world sees them, are far from glorious, but who are those for whom Christ died, those whom Christ loved, and who are also those who have something to show us about what life is for.

Living as we do in this world, this world with an embarrassing and frequently painful gap between how things appear and how God sees them, living in this world, nevertheless, living in the world with Jesus' promise that he would be with us: we see, I think, the need for the sort of discernment that can look beyond the mere appearance of things. This, I think, is the truly remarkable thing about the story from Acts: the new disciples were "speaking in tongues of ecstasy and acclaiming the greatness of God", and, of course, speaking in tongues of ecstasy is all well and good, but it is acclaiming the greatness of God that is really important here: not, of course, just saying that God is great, but having the discernment to see, beneath the rather unpromising appearance of things, that God is at work here, and that God is at work with the sort of mighty acts that were talked about in the Psalm, that Jesus talked about in these discourses to the disciples, and the sort of mighty and glorious acts that were – unobviously and secretly – taking place when the Spirit had come to the early church. And we should not be afraid to pray for the work that we do in this church here and now: we should not be afraid to pray that the Spirit should be with us, that we should have the discernment to see things from God's perspective, the freedom to do what is right when we thus see things, and that the Spirit should bless all that we say and do, in this church, and as we go out into the world.

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