

GLORY AND SERVANTHOOD

Matthew 21. 1-11 (Palm Gospel)

Isaiah 50. 4-9a

Philippians 2. 5-11

Matthew 27. 11-54 (Passion Gospel)

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

On Palm Sunday we find that there is a dual theme that runs through our Scripture readings: we have the theme of glory, and that of servanthood. One might wonder what one has to do with the other!

In our Palm Gospel, taken from Matthew, the crowds that preceded and followed our Lord as he entered into Jerusalem acclaimed him with exaltation. ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they shouted. ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

And on the other hand, in our Passion Gospel, we are given the account of Jesus who bravely, faithfully and humbly accepted the sacrificial role that had been given to him by his Father. He became the obedient servant of God who saved others but would not save himself.

The Passion of Christ carries within it this dual reality, which is often split apart by various segments of the Church. We may, for example, have heard people make a distinction between what they call the ‘theology of the cross’ versus a ‘theology of glory’, as if one were forced to proclaim either Christ’s cross or God’s glory. If we dare to separate these two sides of the mystery of the Passion, we run the risk of misinterpretation and/or abuse.

One side proclaims that Christ's Passion, and therefore our life in Christ, is all about humble servanthood. They remind us that the cross of Christ is a servant's burden; and that we, as Christ's servants, are called to carry a similar burden. You may have noticed that there are some people in the Church-at-large who believe that servanthood and suffering are the same thing. For these people, discipleship is measured primarily in terms of blood, sweat and tears. They believe that the call to faith is a call to struggle, and that the call to ministry is a martyr's song.

Our servanthood, however, needs to be balanced by a healthy dose of glory, a joyous realisation that Christ has won the ultimate victory over sin, death and the devil, and has therefore freed us for service in his name. Without this balance, our understanding of servanthood can become twisted and turn into self-flagellation and false modesty. A skewed notion of servanthood will lead us to believe that God loves us because we suffer; and this is not, and never has been, a prerequisite for his love.

The other side proclaims that our Lord's Passion is all about glory. They declare that the cross of Christ is the throne of victory; and that life in Christ is therefore to know that we are the heirs of salvation and heralds of that salvation to the world. It is people in this camp that tell us that basking in the glory of God is the only thing to do. Glory and praise are in vogue; God's victory over sin and death is 'positive' and 'inspirational'. They recommend that we listen only to 'upbeat' sermons that give no mention of sin, no call to discipleship and no invitation to the narrow road that leads to life.

To focus solely on the glory of Christ's Passion and to revel in the victory of the cross without a healthy dose of servanthood is also dangerous; it can lead to self-congratulation and a false sense of pride.

The two sides of the Passion – glory and servanthood – are two sides of our Lord's life that must be held in balance. When we have a balanced understanding of the meaning of the Passion, there is no need to choose between the alternatives that I have just described. Holding on to this dual mystery is the key to maintaining a balanced and faithful life in Christ.

The dual mystery of the Passion is proclaimed boldly in our second reading from Philippians. As this text tells us, Jesus, being in the form of God, took on the form of a servant. This passage, which was actually an early Christian hymn, describes the dual reality of the Passion of Christ. As he went to the cross, our Lord was both human and divine; he took the form of a slave, being born in human likeness; and yet, he was later highly exalted at the right hand of the throne of God and given the name that is above every name.

As we consider the dual mystery of the Passion described in St Paul's epistle to the Philippian Church, we begin to see that it also gives us pointers about our calling as Christ's disciples, and suggestions about how the mystery of our faith is to be expressed in our lives.

Like our Lord, on this Palm Sunday, and in the days and months to come, we can resolve to have this mind among ourselves: that though we are made in the very image of God, we will not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped. Like Jesus, we can also decide to empty ourselves and to take the form of his servants. Like Christ, we can humble ourselves and accept to be obedient bearers of the cross that we are given.

But as we resolve to do things, we must not lose sight of the precious truth that is part of us and part of our God-given identity. We must not forget that God has, in his own way, highly exalted us at our baptism; and that as children of God, we are

also heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. The Son of God has been ‘appointed heir of all things’. Being a co-heir with Christ means that we, as God’s adopted children, will share in the inheritance of Jesus. What belongs to him will also belong to us. Our Lord will give us his glory, his riches and all things. We are as welcome in God’s family as Christ is; we are ‘accepted in the Beloved’.

You may have heard of, or seen, the musical play called *Annie*. It contains a wonderful illustration of becoming an heir of God. When Annie moves from the orphanage to the Warbucks Mansion, it is an incredible change for her. She leaves behind a spiteful, alcoholic caretaker and enters into a relationship with a caring father. She goes from having no possessions to having a fortune at her disposal. Her hard-knock life is overcome by the brightness of a sunny tomorrow. Seen from a Christian perspective, Annie pictures what being a co-heir with Christ means. ‘We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory’ (Rom 8. 17).

Amen.