

## THE TRUE NATURE OF GLORY

Acts 11. 1-18

Revelation 21. 1-6

John 13. 31-35

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

Imagine that your son was involved in a bad car accident and had to spend time in the Intensive Care Unit at PEH with machines keeping him alive; and then, weeks later, upon his full recovery, wouldn't it be a bit odd not to *celebrate* his homecoming, and simply to remember the darkest days when he was hooked up to a ventilator?

Or think of a joyous birthday party that you attended recently (and I have attended several). Wouldn't you have been surprised if the person who was being honoured at the party used the occasion to tell guests about the worst things that he or she had ever experienced?

When I look at the gospel passage appointed for today, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, I am tempted to think that the *Lectionary* has done something rather similar to the two fictitious scenarios that I have just described. Here we are in the blessed Season of Eastertide; why then are we given this text from John 13, which takes us right back to the darkest night of our Lord's life? Why are we brought back to the scene where Judas has just left (or fled) the room; and where Jesus will momentarily (even though our *Lectionary* passage does not extend that far) predict Peter's threefold denial? Aren't there happier things for us to consider during Eastertide?

But there we have it.

Yet perhaps upon reflection this is not so odd after all. Indeed, it may even be curiously apt.

Consider this: our celebration of Easter is properly enhanced, and our joy refined and deepened, when we can nestle the good news of Christ's resurrection in its proper context of sacrifice, suffering, and all that went into the paradoxical way by which our Lord was 'glorified', which was death on the cross. So even on this side of the Easter Season, we do well to remember the darkness against which the light of Easter shines all the more brightly.

Fleming Rutledge, a priest who served at the parish church which Claudia and I attended before we were married, says this very same thing in one of her books, entitled *The Crucifixion*. Rutledge writes, "The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance. The resurrection is not a set piece. It is not an isolated demonstration of divine dazzlement. It is not to be detached from its abhorrent first act. The resurrection is, precisely, the vindication of a man who was crucified. Without the cross at the centre of Christian proclamation, the Jesus story can be treated as just another story about a charismatic spiritual figure. It is the crucifixion that marks out Christianity as something definitively different in the history of religion. It is in the crucifixion that the nature of God is truly revealed."<sup>1</sup> In other words, we cannot get at the glory of Eastertide without remembering what happened first. Going back to John 13 'fits' Eastertide for this very reason.

Consider this: Christ told the disciples in that Upper Room that love for one another was the truest mark of being one of his disciples. Who knows how the disciples heard those words on that particular Passover night. But now that they (and we) have been to the cross, the acoustics have changed. Now when we hear our Lord

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 44.

tell us to love one another *as he has loved us*, those words echo in our minds in new ways when we hear them alongside Jesus's cry of dereliction from the cross.

Consider this: Christ was preparing the disciples for his absence in these words of John 13. But as the Church prepares to mark again the Ascension of our Lord in a couple of weeks, we (just like the disciples) recognise that we must get used to the physical absence of the Saviour. Indeed, people will 'look' for Jesus, as he himself says in verse 33; but they won't find him, except in the *Christ that others can see in us* and *in the Church when we love one another as our Lord loved us*.

Consider this: Jesus's words in verse 31 of John 13 about his now being 'glorified' admittedly sound rather odd, considering what has just happened. Judas has just fled the Upper Room to go forward with his dirty business. And yet Christ says, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.' The verb for 'glorify' is used in the past tense; and yet it refers to the glorification of our Lord on the cross, which was at that point in time still a future event. Could it be that Jesus was already then so fully coming under the shadow of the cross, that the glorification of the Son through suffering and sacrifice really was well underway? Something like that seems very probable.

There's also a bit of irony here, because the disciples saw no glory. Indeed, had they understood the meaning behind what had just transpired between Christ and Judas (and what Judas's hasty retreat really meant, therefore),<sup>2</sup> then they would have been that much less likely to perceive even a glimmer of glory for our Lord. They may have seen clouds of foreboding, and gloom and other portents of evil; but glory? Not by a long shot.

Yet there it is.

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<sup>2</sup> Verses 28 and 29 of John 13 make it clear that the disciples did *not* understand.

How strange that upon predicting his betrayal and upon seeing his betrayer exit the room that Jesus feels somehow 'glorified'. No mother would claim that her parenthood had been fulfilled upon seeing her son get arrested for cocaine possession. No politician would declare victory upon seeing his country attacked by terrorists. Yet Christ sees the spectre of betrayal and loss and diminishment and so much else that is dire, and yet feels glorified.

Even in the glow of Eastertide, we in the Church do well to remember what the true nature of glory is *for us*. We in the Church are not 'glorified' when we amass money, power, recognition, political clout or business influence as the world reckons those things. The nature of our glory lies elsewhere: in sacrificial love; in service; and, yes, even in laying down our lives for the sake of the kingdom if it comes to that. This Eastertide, let us be looking for opportunities to be 'glorified' in this way; and for opportunities for the Father to be glorified in us.

I close with a question: is it *odd* to return to the Upper Room a month after Easter? The answer is no. If anything, it actually turns out to be oddly *appropriate*.

Amen.