

THEY IN GLORY SHINE

Daniel 7. 1-3, 15-18

Ephesians 1. 11-23

Luke 6. 20-31

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

My mother used to tell me a story about some difficulties her own mother had when she was a little girl in primary school. Her learning process had been fine for the first few years of school, but then in year three it took a turn for the worse. My 'grannie' (as I called her) was having a very hard time following lessons; she couldn't absorb what the teacher was trying to teach; and it led to no end of tears and frustration.

Things went on in that fashion for a while, until, on a hunch, my grandmother's parents took her to an optometrist. It turned out that she couldn't see well at all. For at least a year, anything on the blackboard had been undecipherable to her; the text of the books she was trying to read was fuzzy; and so she simply had not been able to learn. Then, given a pair of glasses, that all changed. She beheld the teacher, and the teacher beheld her, and a great education commenced. In fact, my granny went on to become a teacher herself.

But my mother did not tell me that story as an inspiring example of overcoming a challenge. No, what she remained moved by decades later (and I was moved by it as well), was the feeling that my grandmother had when she walked out of the doctor's office wearing those new glasses. She described what it was like to see as if for the first time. The example she always used was the beams on the wooden roof in the school house: for the first time, she could see the individual beams themselves, as distinct shapes. She had never been able to distinguish them before. For my grandmother, it was an entrance into a whole new world. That world had been there

all the time, but she had not been able to see it. And then all of a sudden she could. She could see; and the world staggered her with its beauty.

One of the most painful questions found in the Bible comes right at the beginning, in Genesis, after Adam and Eve have eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but before they have been expelled from the garden. They ate of the fruit; they knew they were naked; they were ashamed; and then they hid themselves among the trees of the garden. They hid themselves. They intentionally tried to get away from the God who had created this world for them, this world of abundance and fecundity and life. And God asks: 'Where are you?' 'Where have you gone?' Hidden behind this question we can almost hear another one: '*Why* have you gone?'

What a terrible question for God to have to ask: 'Where are you, when you could be with me?'

Being in the presence of God is something that the Hebrews would come to take very seriously. The Mosaic Law itself was one way that God was present among them, physically available in the Ark of the Covenant; and he was also present among them in the actions of the community as they followed that Law. The story of Israel is one about going away from God, and then repenting and returning to God, in order to be with him again, and received by his mercy. The Israelites knew that their fulfilment consisted in being *with God*.

The story of the Incarnation itself is one of God taking the initiative to be *with his people*, in space and in time; the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. And thus to be close to Jesus is to be close to God. It is to live intimately with him, basking in his glory, enjoying his presence.

To do that—to live closely with God—is what it is to be a saint; and when the Church talks about what it is like for the saints in heaven, we sometimes use the term ‘the beatific vision’. That is, we talk about what it is to contemplate God eternally in his heavenly glory, finally seeing God face to face. No longer hiding; being able to answer when God asks, ‘Where are you?’ and saying, ‘Here; here I am’.

This is the promise that is made to us in a very personal way, and it is found throughout the scriptures. Psalm 17 speaks of ‘behold (ing)’ God’s face in righteousness; and chapter 22 of the book of Revelation promises that those who will be saved will see God’s face. To talk about ‘knowing God’s face’ isn’t just a matter of proximity, but of relationship; just as we might say that we know very well someone whom we love, quite apart from being able to detail their physical facial characteristics.

This kind of intimate loving is natural to a human being; indeed, it may be the highest expression of the human being. And being with God is natural to a human being; indeed, it is what we have been created for. If that is the case, then sainthood itself is natural to the human being. It is there for the taking, when God’s grace allows it and we ourselves have not turned away, or occluded our vision in some other way; if we have not hidden ourselves. The saints whom we celebrate today are those who see God, and we have to imagine that every moment of that ‘seeing’ is something like that bracing experience of the little girl (who was my grandmother) with new glasses stepping outside and being staggered by how beautiful everything was. To live with God is perfect happiness, the supreme end of all things. *That* is sainthood.

The problem, of course, is that a saintly life in this fallen world is a difficult one, as our Lord himself makes clear in our reading from the gospel of Luke. There, Christ is identifying who is blessed here on earth, and those he designates are not the comfortable, but rather, he says, the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. Rejoice

when those things happen, our Lord says, because your reward is then going to be great in heaven. Your reward will be the perfect fulfilment of eternal life in the presence of God.

So we see that the transcendence of being a saint in heaven, everything about the 'beatific vision' and eternally seeing the face of God, is all inextricably tied up with the practicalities of being a saint on earth. What happens here on earth matters in heaven; and what happens in heaven matters on earth.

I hope that we can live our lives with that awareness, so that by grace, we can join all the saints in heaven around the throne of God. We know practically how to do this, after all, because Jesus tells us: love your enemies; bless those who curse you; offer the other cheek; be generous; and do unto others as you would have them to do unto you. Then, by grace, we should prepare ourselves to gaze upon the glory of God, face to face, and to be staggered by the beauty that has been revealed. And when God asks, as he asked in the Garden, 'Where are you?', we can honestly respond, with intimate love, 'Here I am, a saint of God.'

Amen.