

Lent 5      St Mary's, Barnes

Those on the recent pilgrimage from this parish will have visited one of the most evocative sites in Jerusalem, Gethsemane, the ancient olive Grove where Jesus went to pray after the last supper. It was here, if you remember where, as the Mark records "Horror and anguish took hold of him" and where he prayed that the cup of suffering might be taken from him- but ending "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." (Mark 14m 32-42). This account is contained in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, but what is fascinating is the way this event is also referred to but with a more developed theological meaning in two later writings. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read "In the course of his earthly life he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to God", the author then drawing the conclusion that as the Son learnt obedience through suffering, he is able to sympathise and help us. (Hebrews 5, 5-10) In today's Gospel from John we read that Jesus told his followers "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" and then he prayed "Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this that I came into this hour." Father glorify your name". A voice was came from heaven "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. (John 12, 20-33).

In Alice in Wonderland there is an interesting exchange.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't- till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master-that's all."

Well, for us Christians, the Bible is the Master and there Glory is one of the key words, with God being described as the Lord of Glory. The word glory brings to mind kings on their thrones, resplendent in gold and jewels, full of renown, and radiant with light and beauty. Some of this imagery is in the Old Testament but for a Christian the true meaning is gradually unveiled in John's Gospel, and a radically new meaning it is, totally different from the way we usually think-not in pomp and splendour but in humility and hiddenness.

Glory begins within the life of the Godhead, where the Father gives himself totally the Son, and the Son gives himself fully to the father in perfect filial response, in the love of the Holy Spirit that unites them. This perfect, reciprocal love is the Glory of God in itself for itself. Then out of this love God gives creates the universe with a life of its own, not tossing it off but giving himself to it pouring himself into it. Something of that Glory is reflected in it, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it "The world is charged with the grandeur of God, it will shine out like shock foil." And then, in the words of Philippians 2 we read that Christ "made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself and was obedient even to the point of death, death on a cross." In John's Gospel, it is this self-emptying that is revealed as the Glory of God-Glory in the love of the Father who gives his Son for the world's salvation, and glory in the obedience of the Son to the Father. This is not just a general obedience but a quite specific obedience that John refers to as "the hour", it is an obedience that leads into the total darkness of the cross.

Here we tiptoe around a great mystery. The Bible takes sin with deadly seriousness. At its core this means quite simply that we human beings have turned in on themselves, away from the God who creates and loves us and this has had devastating consequences. Outwardly this is shown in the selfishness, cruelty and injustice rife in every sphere of life, and inwardly, in the way it cuts us off from the root of

our being and estranges us from our true self. And this separation, this alienation comes come to a focus in the darkness of death.

But again, according to the Bible, God foreknew the consequences of creating a world like ours and was prepared to enter into it and bear those consequences himself-there was a cross in the heart of God from all eternity. This cross is the climax to which John's Gospel, indeed all the Gospels, leads. Here Jesus lets the collective sin of humanity crash upon him and he enters into its darkness, the hell, the apparent abandonment by God, and bears it in himself.

But In the light of Easter that darkness is no darkness, but the final union of the Father who gave his son for the world, and the son who gave himself in human form, even through death's alienation, to the father. In John's Gospel, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension and coming of the Spirit are part of the one movement of the Son to the father along the rocky path of human alienation. The glorification of the father and the glorification of the son is nothing other than that total, mutual self giving revealed in all its luminous radiance. It is totally hidden in the abandonment on the cross but through the resurrection we know that is above all where the divine glory is to be seen.

At the funeral of a priest friend of mine the congregation included many people who in one way or another were broken or felt rejected. In his tribute the preacher said that this friend had saved people from their own self-destruction. Christ has saved humanity as a whole from its self-destruction and we are those who put our faith in him.

These are heady matters, beyond the reach of our tiny human minds but we know that in Christ we have liberation from all that besets us, joy in all the circumstances of our lives, light in any darkness We know that nothing, absolutely nothing, not even death can separate us from God, because Christ's life, that unbreakable union of God and humanity, lives in us, and we live in him-to whom be glory now and for ever.