

12th Sunday after Trinity (8th September 2019) Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's, 8am Holy Communion.

In today's short epistle, the word glory appears four times and the word glorious twice. It is part of a chapter in which glory is the main theme. "I don't know what you mean by "Glory", said Alice a remark to which Humpty Dumpty in Wonderland gives a famous response.

We can sympathise with Alice. It is not an easy word to define. Clearly it has something to do with beauty, but more than beauty, for it suggests splendour and light. We sense something of this when we talk about a glorious day. As Edward Thomas puts it in his poem called "Glory"

The glory of the beauty of the morning, ---

The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;

In the Bible, Glory belongs above all to God. He is sublime beauty, splendour and light. So, glory is an ultimate constituent of reality. But that glory is not just beauty in itself. It is the beauty of supreme goodness, and the light of ultimate truth. So, I would define glory as that sublime conjunction of beauty, goodness and truth which characterises God.

The Gospel is the proclamation that the radiance of this glory can be seen in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1, 3). The light of the knowledge of the glory of God has shone in his face. You remember that in a wonderful scene Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus, and saw him transfigured before them. They saw in him the uncreated light of God.

But the good news of the Gospel is not only about God, it is about us. For as St Paul put it, we, contemplating the glory of God with open faces are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory. We are to be so changed that we reflect that glory. I remember once Malcolm Muggeridge describing how he visited someone very frail in hospital and how they seemed to shine with an eternal translucence.

In experiences of human beauty there is something tantalising.

Edward Thomas continues

The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning

All I can ever do, all I can be,

And he ends the poem with a vivid image 'I cannot bite the day to the core'

There is something ultimately elusive about experiences of human beauty. It draws us, and draw us to something beyond itself, which we cannot grasp or contain.

In what has always been my favourite essay of C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" he argues that in heaven this elusiveness disappears. We will pass into the beauty we see; it will become part of us in a transfigured mode of being. One remarkable feature of this new order will be how we experience other people. As he wrote

'It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet if at all, only in a nightmare...There are no ordinary people...it is immortals whom you joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit-immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.'

This is a view of the world which radically changes the whole way we see the world, and especially the way we see other people. It is in this light that we should think about and lift them in prayer into the presence of God.