



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 27, 2022
The Last

Festal Eucharist
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

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‘By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord, guard and keep us.’
(From the blessing of the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil)

A couple of weeks ago, the Pilgrims’ Class explored Andrei Rublev’s extraordinary icon of the Trinity, painted in the 15th century, that is a depiction of the visit of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis. Rublev uses a muted pallet of color for the icon, and the colors are significant, but none more so than the color blue; for the color blue represents the glory of God. Each of the angels is wearing traditional dress, an undergarment (a traditional Greek *Chiton*) and an outer garment (a traditional Greek *himation*). The Father’s undergarment is a bright blue – it is the color that represents his glory – but it is covered by his flowing outer garment and, thus, we only *glimpse* the Father’s glory. In contrast, the *outer* garment of the Son is that same bright blue; the Father’s glory is fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

The word ‘glory’ is a very powerful word and yet, in English, does little to convey the depth and complexity of God’s glory for, in the Bible, there are *several* words in Hebrew and Greek and, indeed, in Aramaic also, that this one English word describes. In Hebrew it can derive from the word for ‘heavy’ – God’s glory is immense and fills the universe. There is also a Hebrew word that derives from the word for ‘luminous’ or ‘radiant’ – God’s glory is bright and fills the darkness of our lives. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are also many instances in which God’s glory is revealed through saving acts. The greatest story of all was the story of the Exodus in which God called his chosen people to himself and through which his glory was revealed in many different ways, not just in the Exodus itself but his encounter with the twelve tribes and in the particularity of his meeting with Moses: the burning bush; the pillar of cloud by day; the pillar of fire by night; the cloud covering Mount Sinai or the Tent of Meeting; and the glory that Moses glimpsed when he spoke with God on the mountain. In our Epistle reading, Paul refers to that particular revelation of God’s glory that made the face of Moses shine brightly and which frightened the people of Israel so much that he had to put a veil on his face. But, as Paul reminds us, it was also because Moses did not want the people see that the glory was fading.

Today’s celebration, the Sunday next before Lent, is filled with images of glory but not like human ideas of glory – of self-aggrandizement, or celebrity status, or military might, or the exercise of power. I am sure that many of us are disturbed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ I was taken with those almost pitiful yet so powerful little videos that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has been making on his mobile device – in which he uses the traditional Ukrainian salute “Glory to Ukraine” - but the glory that he refers to relates to what he describes as ‘the truth’ – he said, “*and the truth is that this is our land, our country, our children.*” Finding

glory in *the people* is a very different thing to finding glory sought through the might of military power and dominance.

The glory of God is not about dominance and control; it is not about making others feel small and powerless. In fact, the glory of God is contradictory in the eyes of the world because it is ultimately revealed in the self-emptying of God onto his creation; the Creator of the Universe making himself small in the womb of Mary and whose body would suffer torture and death. Listen again to the beginning of the collect that we prayed at the beginning of mass:

O God, who before the passion of thy only-begotten Son didst reveal his glory upon the holy mount:

Glory and Passion - the two are inextricably linked. And, in order for us to be changed into the likeness of Jesus 'from glory to glory,' we, also, must bear our cross, just as the Lord carried his cross to Calvary. The collect continues:

Grant unto us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross.

In the eyes of the world, this seems like an utter contradiction – how can the one who made the universe humble himself and accept death, and a painful and terrible death at that? How can such a death be in any way glorious? How can *any* death be glorious?

Yet, as the collect concludes, it is only through this seeming contradiction of taking up the cross in order to discover the glory of God that we can ultimately become more like him; '*changed into his likeness from glory to glory.*'

If we turn to John's Gospel for a moment, we will see that the word glory is used very deliberately and carefully. In the prologue we read, "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14) Then, at the wedding of Cana in Galilee, when Jesus turns the water into wine, we are told that this, the first of his *signs* (note – not miracles) was done in order to reveal his glory to his disciples. All of the seven signs in John's Gospel are designed to reveal something of the glory of Jesus, and they lead up to the ultimate revelation of the glory of Christ for which John uses a special word, his *glorification*. Just before his arrest, Jesus is praying intimately with his Father, and says that his glory he wished to share with his followers: "*The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*" (John 17:22-23)

The glory that is to be shared with the followers of Jesus is not like human glory. Instead of dominance and control, it is recognized through acts of love and self-sacrifice. And Jesus set before his friends an example, for the ultimate sign of his glory – his glorification – came when he was lifted up from the earth and stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross and embraced a world divided, and, sad, and lonely, and angry.

Michael Ramsey once wrote: "*The glory of God in all eternity is that ceaseless self-giving love of which Calvary is the measure.*"²

Just pause for a moment and think about that one little sentence that should make us tremble:

The glory of God in all eternity is that ceaseless self-giving love of which Calvary is the measure.

And how significant that Rublev's Icon has the three angels arranged in such a way that they form the shape of a chalice – a symbol of sacrificial love.

My friends, in order to claim the glory that has been promised to us we have to do two things: First, to be prepared to take up our own cross to follow Jesus – to walk the way of sacrificial love and not simply cling to the transient things of this world. The first Christians were called ‘followers of the way’ because they walked with Jesus in *his* way and not their own, quite literally taking up their cross in order to follow him. Secondly, we are to live out the Lord’s new commandment which is to love one another as he has loved us; to be agents of love in the world where some would stifle love.

And Jesus gave us examples: He washed the feet of his disciples to set before them servant leadership; he loved his followers ‘to the end’ and carried his own cross. We, too, as his followers are called to wash one another’s feet (not literally, as we will re-enact on Maundy Thursday) but in small acts of charity and kindness; in our search for social justice and inclusion; in challenging the world in its fallen nature; in standing up for the truth. In so doing, we may very well be asked to take up our cross in much more than a figurative way.

I think it is significant that at this moment, when the world seems to be so unsafe, and with some world leaders assuming dictatorial power and stifling the voices of those who speak the truth, that this Lent we will reflect on five martyrs of our time at evensong. They carried their cross and became a witness for the servanthood of Christ – witnessed to his glory and his glorification. The word martyr means *witness* and we, who are called to bear witness should remember with soberness the meaning of that word and that we, too, might be called to be martyrs for Christ.

For a Christian to yearn to glimpse the glory of God, he or she has to understand the sobering reality that the glory may still yet come through suffering and pain. For as Michael Ramsey also said “*The glorification of Christians is no pious mysticism...It is a matter of conflict and struggle in human flesh and blood.*”³ or, as we shall pray at the blessing of the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil, **‘By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord, guard and keep us.’**

Let us pray.

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ The sermon was preached as Russian troops were attacking Ukraine

² AM Ramsey – ‘*God, Christ, and the World*’ page 41