

March 29, 2009

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B (John 12:20-33)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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Praise, honor, beauty, the height of achievement, prosperity, fame: these are the ways we view glory. If we are glorified, it is generally thought of as a great, joyful, prestigious state of being. There is a powerful status connected to the word "glory." Glory is often something we seek. Rulers, athletes, businesspersons, religious leaders -- pick any vocation, and you will find those who seek glory. While glory may be attainable, it is not permanent. Often, time exposes those who seek glory as arrogant, difficult, self centered, or even foolish. One of my favorite poems is one called "Ozymandias," by Percy Bysshe Shelley. It reads,

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The glory, the power of Ozymandias was all an illusion, really. It did not stand the test of time. Nothing remains of that monument to self except ruins in the sand.

Today, we hear the words of Jesus and he is talking about glory. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. The time has come for God's glorification: "Father, glorify your name." Only, what Jesus is talking about is unlike anything we could possibly want for ourselves or loved ones and unlike anything that we associate with glory. Jesus is talking about allowing himself to be humiliated, beaten, and killed. Jesus sees the way forward and it is sacrifice.

Surely, this is counterintuitive to those who are with Jesus. Enough so that they probably do not understand what he is talking about. Adding to the probable confusion is the talk about seeds and plants. However, Jesus knows that people

are coming to see him -- not only the Jews, but also now the Gentiles. If they want to see him, then they have to see him as who he truly is, the One who came to live in obedience to the will of the creator, the One who comes to reconnect God's people to God, by living and expressing love, God's love for all people.

We often hear the phrase, "Jesus died for our sins." This follows the idea that Jesus bought freedom for the world from sin and death through his own death. The other model is that Jesus was a substitute, paying the price for our sins, rather than us. In these cases, Jesus is more of a victim. These models offer possibilities for why Christ came into the world. However, the Gospel according to John does not really go there. In John, Jesus is in control of his own actions. He is a willing participant. Jesus, although he foresees the pain and brutality that lies ahead, although his soul is troubled, does not ask to be saved from this hour. Rather, he forges ahead willingly as an expression of obedience to God, a love of God. He continues out of love for all people. It is a deep, devoted love.

When I was 22 years old, a friend of mine, nicknamed "Barney," died in an auto accident. He was 21. It was a painful experience for all of my friends and me. Barney's mother was very strong, and comforted us that week as we mourned. The day of the viewing at the funeral home, I arrived early. I was one of the first there, if not the first there, outside of the family. Then, I saw something I will never forget. I saw Barney's mother in utter grief. She broke down at her son's coffin. "I want him back," she screamed in hysterical tears. "I want him back." It was so painful to watch. But, I know at that moment, it did not matter what Barney had done any wrong at any point his life, it did not matter what difficulties his mother may have had with him as he grew up, it did not matter how the accident happened. His mother just wanted him to have life, to have a chance at having happiness, to have a chance at being in fruitful relationships. I believe she would have done anything to prevent his death. I am sure she would have traded places with him that night even if it meant her fatal end. Her life did not matter. Barney's did. That was the depth of her love.

That is the kind of love we experience in Jesus. Jesus knows he is going to suffer. He knows we are going to demand his blood; he knows he is going to be raised up on the cross. No matter our mistakes, no matter all the wrong we have done, Jesus is willing to meet our demands, is willing to participate in that demand, in order to prove how much he loves us, in order to prove he is from God. The Word in the flesh, weak flesh, human flesh, is committed to restoring humanity to God. God is self-giving, life-giving, and eternal. That love is the glory of God. It is the real beauty, the greatest of achievements. That is a deep, permanent love that will not be erased over time.

We all have a deep longing for acceptance and love and we find that in God through Jesus. We find a God who is committed to us, who wants to be with us, bring us healing, suffer for us and give us life. Those who usurp God's rule, who trample on the weak, who exalt themselves, will not succeed. In a world full of self-glorification, the glory of God in Christ shines through. That is the real glory.

That is the Glory of God. That is why so many respond to Jesus. That is why so many respond with worship, praise & thanksgiving. That is why so many respond in how they express their lives. People are drawn to Christ because of the cross, and thus restored to God.

We have the opportunity to respond too. We can continue reshape our lives and participate in the Body of Christ, bringing forth that love, that glory into the world. We can continue to bring real glory, lasting glory into the world. The hour is upon us. Soon, Jesus will be raised on the cross. We will demand it and then our hearts will break. But, will be changed into a moment of glory that demands our response. The fruit of that moment, the fruit of the work of Christ, is when we draw near to Christ and continue to bring about reconciliation and restoration in the world.