

“True glory”

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John 12:20-33

What's true glory? A sportsman would probably say it's winning an Olympic Gold or a football premiership or breaking a world record. Parents might say it's their children coming top of the class or graduating from university. A businessman might say it's breaking through the million dollar salary mark or becoming CEO of a top company. A pop singer might say it's the adulation of thousands of teenagers, for an actor it's winning an Oscar, for a politician it's winning an election. We associate personal glory with high achievement, with wide acclaim, with great status, with the winning of honour and wealth and splendour.

Today's gospel passage presents a rather different view. In response to the enquiry from some unnamed Greeks, Gentiles who want to see him, Jesus says that the time has come for him to be glorified, and then he unpacks this glorification with a succession of rather obscure sayings, more riddles than plain speaking – about grains of wheat, losing your life, his troubled soul, the ruler of the world and being lifted up from the earth. What's it all mean?

Let me dig into Jesus' teaching with six brief observations. The first is that Jesus regards his glorification as nothing less than his crucifixion. He speaks about a grain of wheat dying, and in case we don't get it a few verses later he refers to being lifted up from the earth – an allusion again to last week's gospel reading about the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness – and John helpfully adds an explanatory note that Jesus said this “to indicate the kind of death he was to die”. For our culture, where glorification relates to great victories and great honour, to regard death as glorification, especially a humiliating shameful death by crucifixion, is extraordinary. But that's what Jesus is saying.

But secondly note that in referring to the death of a grain of wheat, Jesus says that it then bears much fruit. He has to be thinking of the new life that follows his impending death on the cross – the new life through his resurrection, the new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit which follows his resurrection, and the new life through the growth and expansion of the church throughout the world, even to the homeland of the visiting Greeks. So while Jesus specifically identifies his death as his glorification, he has in view the fabulous fruits which flow from that undeserving death.

Thirdly, Jesus denotes that his death involves judgment and the overthrow of the powers of evil. “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out”. The undeserving death of Jesus, the amazing expression of God's love in Jesus dying on the cross, exposes evil for what it is – self-serving, exploitative, corrupt, malevolent – and in doing so conquers the hold of evil over the world. Goodness triumphs, Jesus comes to life again, God's love prevails, and every generation and every person since has the opportunity of joining in this ongoing victory of goodness and love, through their faith and through their following the way of Jesus.

Fourthly, in referring to his death as being lifted up from the earth, Jesus adds that he will draw all people to himself. On the surface of it this may mean little more than people being drawn ghoulishly to the brutal spectacle of someone hanging on a cross until death. But it must surely also refer to the worldwide mission of Jesus and the church which he establishes through his death, resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was certainly the understanding of some early copyists of John's gospel, who replaced “all people” with

“all things”, noting that Jesus’ mission isn’t just for the salvation of people but in fact for the salvation of the whole of creation.

Fifthly, see the call to discipleship in this teaching of Jesus. “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also”. There’s a huge challenge here, Jesus calling these curious Greeks, the crowd around them, and his own followers, to see that they are to give of themselves in the same way Jesus gives – to love with God’s love, to put others well ahead of yourself, to accept the jealousy and the opposition which comes your way, to serve without counting the cost. Jesus even speaks in terms of losing your life for the sake of receiving God’s gift of eternal life.

And lastly, see that Jesus himself knows the cost of what he has to do, he feels the pain of it. There’s no Garden of Gethsemane anguish in John’s gospel, that grief and pain is told only in Matthew, Mark and Luke. But there is today’s admission that “now my soul is troubled”. The way of Jesus is not pain-free, is not without cost, is not all sweetness and light. But it is the way of glory, the way to glory.

True glory is being in right relationship with God. True glory is receiving God’s love and living in the power of that love. True glory is the way of Jesus, the way of self-giving love. True glory involves willingness to accept opposition, hurt, even a humiliating death, in the service of God and in the service of God’s love for all people and for the whole of his creation. True glory is knowing God’s love in your life, every day till the day you die – and beyond!

To the glory of God. Amen.