

Sermon 24.5.2020

Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10,32-35; 1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11; John 17.1-11

‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.’

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I recently came across a German word that was new to me but which has been occupying my thoughts for the last few weeks, it is the word *Urvertrauen*. For those of you who, like me, didn't know it, it is a word drawn from psychology, one without a good English equivalent. It describes the basic, foundational trust in the world and in other people that children in a loving home develop during the first months of life. It provides them, some psychologists argue, with an emotional security that will last for the rest of their lives.

I came across the word in a debate, one playing out across the world as well as in Austria, about the effect of the pandemic on children. Would they, still trying to make sense of their environment, trying to understand what in the world was safe and reliable and what dangerous, be lastingly damaged by the sense of hidden threat, the insecurity, the unreliability of the world in a pandemic? Would they ever manage to form a deep and lasting foundational security, an *Urvertrauen*?

But I think it is a question that has touched many of us over the last few weeks – and one that will continue to live with us during the months ahead. It is a debate, of course, being written by adults about children, but I sense grown-up anxiety here too. Adults have had to test their own deep sense of trust, wondering at the economic, or social, or bodily wounds that the future will bring, wondering what kind of a future they can trust in, wondering at a world that has been revealed to contain such uncontainable dangers.

The Gospel reading this morning touches on precisely these questions. It comes from the final words that Jesus will speak before his arrest in the garden, his final moment of communion with the disciples before the violence and terror of his death. It is a time of parting, sombre and sad, but also a time of instruction and reassurance. He tells the disciples how it is they are to live, and in what they are to trust, until He comes again.

And as he finishes this long discourse, Jesus gazes upwards and he prays. And it is this closing prayer that formed the reading we heard this morning, the longest prayer said by Jesus in any of the Gospels.

‘Father,’ He begins, ‘the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, [...] I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.’

When I first read this, I felt as if its meaning slipped away from me as I tried to grasp it, as if the more I read it the less I understood it. There seemed to me so much mystery in the simple few words, ‘glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you’. But as I kept returning to this complex, poetic prayer, I began to allow myself to be carried by its rhythm without trying to figure it out, to turn it into cut-and-dried philosophy. I listened to the way it circled on itself, how the word ‘glorify’ came back over and again like the bassline in a song.

And I began to hear in its circularity, its repetition, a description of the mystery of the Trinity, the relationship of God with Himself, how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit overlap and interconnect, glorifying and being glorified in turn by one other. It reminded me of early Christian depictions of the Trinity as a dance, with the three persons of God shown as people holding hands and spinning around each other. ‘Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.’

The extraordinary promise of Christianity is that this sharing of glory is not for the Trinity alone: we too will come to participate in it. Our destiny is to be included fully in God’s life, swallowed up into this divine relationship itself.

Immediately after the passage from the Gospel that I just reread, Jesus includes us in the same rhythmic, inclusive, circulating prayer that he used to describe the relationship between him and the Father. Before I read them, I would invite you not to try to understand them but just to let their poetry and rhythm wash over you. He says: ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.’

I, You, they, they, You, Me. It becomes almost like a chant. Jesus brings us into the life of the Father and the Son, into their relationship.

In a celebrated sermon, C. S. Lewis pointed out that glory is always about relationship, the passing of pleasure and praise from one being to another. What is so compelling about Christianity for Lewis is that it promises not only that God is

pleasing to us, but that we too can be pleasing to God; not only do we praise God, God might also find in us cause for praise. God, after all, believes that we are worth dying for.

Lewis describes this as being something like the intense pleasure that a child feels when she is praised by her parents, or, more extraordinarily, like a beautiful landscape or picture or song that finds us beautiful in return.

Lewis identified this desire for inclusion in God's life and glory as the most fundamental of all human desires, the desire that all other desires can only weakly reflect. It is a desire that the world cannot answer: the landscape or the painting or the song will not love us back, will not find us beautiful, will not include us in itself – but God will.

It is a desire, or perhaps more a thirst or a hunger, that has become more acute – or simply more visible – in the turmoil of the pandemic. We can see with new clarity how far we are from living immersed in the security of God, how much our *Urvertrauen*, our faith in the world, is assaulted and assailed. We can see too, more clearly and more certainly, how great is our desire to be folded into the flowing and reciprocating glory of God.

Some day we will have it; some day the whole creation will pass fully into that divine life. But until then we are not abandoned. As Jesus makes clear elsewhere in this final conversation with the disciples: we are to be given the Holy Spirit to comfort and help us until He comes again. Jesus tells them: '[the Father] will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit [and] you know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'

Jesus is telling us in practical terms where we should base our *Urvertrauen*, our most essential trust. As Christians we understand that developing that trust is a lifelong practice but it is one that we do with each other's help, one that we do by participating in the life of the church. As we pray, as we worship, as we glorify God week by week, day by day, in church or at home, we return ourselves to God and to the Spirit that abides with us and is in us.

As Jesus says about us: 'They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.'

Amen.