

Called to Eternal Glory

5 November 2023, Sung Eucharist. Readings: Matthew 24.1-14 and 1 Thessalonians 2.9-13

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

Amen.

1.) OUR LONGING FOR GLORY

The 26th October is always a very special day for me and my family.

Not only because it's Austria's national holiday, but also because it's my son Titus' birthday. He just turned three!

Like many boys his age Titus is fascinated by anything with four wheels that makes a lot of noise. It is for this reason he is always excited to see the whole city of Vienna full of police cars, fire engines and motorbikes on his birthday. And best of all Titus doesn't have any idea that it's Austria's national holiday. As far as he knows his mum and dad have organised everything just for him.

Something rather strange happened this year as we visited the attractions in the city centre. At one point the crowd split to make way for a short, stocky man. Suddenly the people who had noticed the man started to behave in a very strange way. Some wanted to have their picture taken with him. Others queued up to shake his hand and others wanted to have a quick chat.

I have to admit that in the end I wanted to shake his hand too. It was the mayor of Vienna, Michael Ludwig but Titus wasn't interested at all. He was more interested in meeting the firefighters!

Isn't it strange how we tend to react to those who for whatever reason are famous? Those who appear on the big stages, those who wield great power. Those who have impressive abilities. Those who have either achieved greatness or were simply born into it. Important, distinguished and well-known 'celebrities' evoke the most curious behaviour from 'ordinary' people.

Some scholars argue that since the decline of religion, our Western culture is increasingly obsessed with the rich and famous. Indeed, some claim there is a cult of celebrity: The ancient gods have been replaced by new albeit very flawed

deities because humans have a profound desire to 'transcend the normal', the mundane, the everyday.¹

To some extent, all of us – you and me – experience a strange attraction to the rich and famous. There is a fascination with fame and fortune, with glory and splendour that is ingrained in every one of us.

Just stop for a moment and ask yourself this question: Which famous person would I like to spend a few minutes with? Who would I like to shake hands with?

2.) TRANSITORY GLORY

We are not alone in this fascination with glory.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus' disciples direct his attention to the great and splendid structure of the Jerusalem Temple. The disciples' enthusiasm for the splendour and grandeur of the temple is even more evident in the accounts of St Mark and St Luke:

In Luke, chapter 21 we are told that

'some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.'

They were impressed by the Temple's glory.

Jesus, however, is completely unimpressed. Instead of joining in the praise, he makes a disturbing announcement:

**'Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another;
all will be thrown down.'**

For all its grandeur and artistic design the Temple will not last. It's glory will eventually crumble and fade away.

What Jesus said must have deeply troubled the disciples. And yet his words contain an important message for us today. Like the disciples, we are easily dazzled by outward splendour – whether it's magnificent buildings or influential, successful or famous people.

¹ Cf. Beres, Derek, Do We Worship Celebrities Like Religious Figures?, <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/do-we-now-worship-celebrities-like-religious-figures/>, 1.11.2023.

Jesus' words reminds us that the glory of every building, every empire and every historical figure will eventually fade. And his words have proved true: For 2000 years, empires, nations, kings and rulers have risen to power. But in the end, not one of them has remained.

All that remained of the Temple after its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD was the western wall. A few stones were left in place. We can also still marvel at the remnants of empires today, but these are only ruins. Their former glory and greatness is gone.

In the end, all the influence and wealth that human beings strive for and accumulate in this world – all the glory that we long and work for – is only temporary, fleeting.

3.) GOD'S INVITATION – CALLED TO ETERNAL GLORY

But that's not all. In our second reading from 1 Thessalonians, St Paul mentions a glory that will never pass away.

He writes in verses 11 and 12:

As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, **who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**

St Paul's words of encouragement contain an incredible message: God invites us into his kingdom, into his glory.

Why is this so incredible?

Firstly, because God invites us to **draw near to him**. No offence to Michael Ludwig, but a brief handshake with the mayor of Vienna is in no way comparable to this promise of intimacy with the creator! The king of the universe whose splendour and majesty are beyond all our comprehension calls us into his presence. God who is the creator and sustainer of all things desires that every single human being draw close to him.

Secondly, this invitation is so incredible because God's glory is **infinite, eternal**. It is beyond our wildest dreams and imaginations. God's glory once glimpsed is more beautiful than anything else in the universe. In addition, we are invited

to delight in glory that will never fade away. God's glory is from everlasting to everlasting.

Each time we pray 'for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. For ever and ever' in the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded of God's **eternal** glory.

Thirdly, God's invitation to share his glory is so incredible because it is **unmerited**. It is **rooted in God's infinite love and grace**.

In a sermon entitled 'The Weight of Glory', C.S. Lewis explains that entering and enjoying God's glory is only possible through Christ's saving work on the cross. Only Christ's perfect obedience and sacrifice for us on the cross enables us to find God's approval, to please God, and to enter his eternal kingdom and glory.

As C.S. Lewis put it:

'To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son – it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.'²

Being invited to share in God's glory means that the eternal king wants you and me *personally* to be a real ingredient in his divine and eternal happiness. He not only pities us – he *really* loves us. Because of Christ's redeeming work, God delights in us. It is his redeeming work on which we depend as we seek through grace to grow in the likeness of Christ.

This unimaginable truth is beautifully expressed each time a person is baptised: No one could ever earn God's approval on their own. No one except Jesus can live up to God's perfect standards. But those who are baptised are being clothed with Christ's perfect life. They are born again by water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom and God's glory.

How wonderful it is that we will be reminded of this truth today when shortly the parents and godparents of *Henry Nnaemeka* present him for baptism!

² C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>, last accessed on 3/11/2023.

4.) LIVING GLORIOUS LIVES

God's glorious invitation is not only about our future, but it is also to profoundly shape how we live our lives in the present. St Paul encourages the Thessalonians and us to lead a life worthy of God. We are called to live *glorious lives*, both individually and as the Church.

What does that mean?

Every human being, each of us is created for nothing less than sharing and enjoying God's glory for all eternity. This means that even the most uninteresting, boring, or annoying person you can think of is created and redeemed for this incomprehensible purpose. In truth there are no *ordinary* people. We are all extraordinary people called by God to share in his inexpressible joy, in his extraordinary glory!

God calls us to help each other to lead lives worthy of this invitation. This may require of us emulating Christ self-sacrifice. 'Not my will, but thy will be done.' It is God who invites us to help each other on this journey into eternal glory. It is God who begins to transform us into his Son's very image and likeness. Even the least of us is destined for eternal glory!

To see and treat each other, every person we meet, with the greatest reverence and respect is one further step on our journey into God's glory.

May we all journey well that the glory of which Paul writes may be ours.

Amen.