

St Mary-le-Tower Ipswich

Sunday after Ascension Day (Easter 7)

1st June 2014

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin, Vicar

The Acts of the Apostles 1.6-14

When the apostles had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

The Gospel of John 17.1-11

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given

him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 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.

'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. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

'I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

SERMON

In the Gospel reading Jesus speaks of divine glory, but what he means is surprising. There are two principal meanings 'glory', earthly and heavenly. The earthly meaning is about exalted renown and earthly achievement, and is often used in respect of military conflict, sporting competition, artistic endeavour and sights of great beauty. The heavenly meaning is about divine magnificence, about the character of heaven.

It is no coincidence that the same word is used for both. It is a very natural human assumption that what is glorious on earth is also glorious in heaven. But the way Jesus uses the word, this ain't necessarily so. Indeed the way that Jesus uses the word, invites us to start from a much more revolutionary idea of divine glory.

The account of the ascension of Jesus in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, might well have seemed to the disciples to tick clearly both boxes, revealing both the heavenly and earthly glory of Jesus. They were

deeply moved by the experience; it turbocharged their desire to pray and seek for and wait on God. Indeed it must have been in many ways a glorious event, crowning the ministry of Jesus on earth.

But when Jesus uses 'glory' in John 17 as today, he doesn't in the first place mean his ascension at all, but rather his loving service to humanity on the cross. The ascension of Jesus was indeed glorious, but it is glorious only because of the cross. For the glory of God is the glory of selfless loving service, which actually turns earthly notions of glory upside down. For God, true glory is not about winning, but serving, for this is the authentic expression of love.

In this gospel passage, Jesus talks about sharing in the glory of God, that he would share in the glory of God on the cross. But he also talks about his disciples sharing in that glory too. This doesn't mean just basking in some sort of heavenly glow, but sharing in the divine glory of loving service; serving one another, serving the world that God loves, and in so doing serving God too. Again this is the authentic expression of love.

Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John, is the fourth chapter in what are known as the Farewell Discourses of Jesus. These chapters are a profound exploration of the purpose and meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus, his revelation of the character and purposes of God. They are also a profound exploration of the call to Christian ministry to the Disciples.

These chapters start with Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, and the rest of the discourses really just draw out the meaning of that sign. The Church, the children of God are those who are learning to share in the glory of divine loving service. So the call to us too, us modern day disciples of Jesus Christ, is also to learn to share in and reveal the glory of God.

This is what we are doing, as we maintain a beautiful house of prayer, as we offer worship in the beauty of glorious music. But all these things are profoundly empty of real glory, divine glory, when they are not done in a spirit of selfless loving service, when they are not done with a profound desire to serve one another and also the world that God loves.

The picture of divine glory in the life of a Church is seriously not complete without visible service to God's world that is truly selfless. It is not enough just to serve one another, we are called to serve God's world. *"We do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."* (2 Corinthians 4.5)

If there is a single reason why we are going as a church to get involved in leading the Shared Community Space project in the south wing of 17 Tower Street, this is it. It is to share in and reveal the glory of God, in our loving service to the wider community of Ipswich.

It's what the Town Pastors are already doing; it's what the Winter Night Shelter is already doing; it's what countless Christian service projects have done through the centuries; revealing the glory of God in selfless loving and sacrificial service to the world.

Not an earthly glory, but a heavenly glory.

Amen.