

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

On Friday nights we have begun taking Beatrice for a swim so that she doesn't feel left out when her sisters have their swimming lesson. I don't really like the idea of going swimming at Westgate. This is for two reasons, firstly, and this may surprise you, I don't look good in my swimming trunks – I could do with one of those all over body suits. And secondly, I have to take my glasses off so I can't see a thing. You would have thought that this wasn't a problem – after all I'm only swimming. But the fact is that I cannot make out who people are until they are close and I cannot see peoples faces. So I find myself staring at people to see if they really are part of my family – sometimes longer than I should, or ignoring my wife and family because I can't see who they are. I have not yet had the experience of grabbing hold of a strange woman but I can see it is going to happen at some point if I'm not careful.

The tenuous link between this and our Gospel reading is that we are still, all of us, even at this late stage in the Easter season, in the business of looking for Jesus, of seeing Jesus for who he really is. And, like me without my glasses, we often find that our vision is not 100% that we are peering and squinting rather than just seeing Jesus.

It might seem odd that we have returned from John 21 last week to John 13 this week, but instead of thinking we are going backwards in the story, think of it rather as us scanning the whole scene, trying to get a clearer view of who this man Jesus is. We have gone back today to the night of the Last Supper which might seem slightly random but in John's Gospel this is actually the very beginning of a long section called the Last Discourse. So we are taken back to the beginning of the end which of course is actually just the end of the beginning – you see what I mean, that's exactly what I was saying last week about John's Gospel, if you read it too much you go bog eyed and start speaking like him! The opening of today's Gospel is a typical example – Now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also Glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. The experts devote pages to what that might mean but let's face it, it is just confusing!

So I want to talk about Glory today which I hope will give us a slightly clearer picture of the Jesus of John's Gospel.

You can't miss Glory in the first half of this reading – there are 5 references to the glorification of God and Jesus. Judas has gone out, gone to betray Jesus and Jesus says Now the Son of man has been Glorified – it is Judas's betrayal which begins the process which will lead through death and resurrection, a string of events which proclaim the glory of God. The word Glory is understood in a particular way here. For John Glory is not just having a party or seeing something really great. The Glory of God, the wonder, the stupendous almost incredulous thing about God is that his Glory is seen in the death and resurrection of his Son. In fact this section of John's Gospel has been called the book of Glory – because we see the glory of God in his willingness to become man in Jesus and to die for love of us.

We need, a little bit, to get our heads around what we mean by the Glory of God because it goes to the heart of our life together as a Christian community.

We often make the mistake of thinking that the Christian life is about doing good, being nice to people, helping people – as if our value is measured by God in terms of how much we help others. Or we make the other common mistake of thinking that the Christian life is about obeying a set of rules. The more rules we obey the closer we are to God. We find virtue in *not* doing a lot of things that might actually be rather fun because we think religion is about obeying rules.

Well, having said all that don't give up the voluntary job in the community, sell the house and go and live a life of debauchery just yet – because although Christianity is not primarily about doing good or obeying rules, there is a catch!

But the first thing to say about the Christian life is that it is about the Glory of God, about seeing the Glory of God in the person of Jesus and about sharing in that Glory through Jesus. We could all have a go at defining what we mean



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by the Glory of God but it is at root something to do with beauty. For Christians the ultimate vision, the real experience of seeing in all its fullness, is the beatific vision, the vision of God granted to those who with faith in Jesus have passed into the heavens. But even though here on earth we cannot see that most beautiful of visions, we can, when we look at the world in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection, begin to see something of God's beauty.

Beauty is a fickle concept, difficult to pin down. It is also commonly hijacked by a culture that wants us to believe that we can find ultimate beauty in this life. A beautiful woman, or a beautiful man might tell us something of the Glory of God but its only part of a beauty which is much broader than that.

To become a Christian is not primarily to be good or to obey rules but to be co-opted into the Glory of God in Jesus. But we are not called just to join this Glory and then swim about saying how beautiful everything looks! To be called into the Glory of God, now, today is to be called to be a part of the divine action of God in Jesus. To be a Christian is to participate in divine activity!

God calls us to act in such a way that the nature of God becomes visible in us – so that we become signs of God's beauty, in a world which desperately needs it. The glory of God and the business of us giving glory to God is about participation in the divine life. Through Chris's death and resurrection we are called to participate in the divine life, to participate in Gods Beauty.

If I have lost you, let me try and put it more simply: We are called to help others, to use that horrid phrase to 'do good' but not because doing good is good in itself but because it makes visible the glory of God. So Christian Aid week this week points us to glory - financial generosity to the needy, support of the poor and oppressed, protest about injustice are all valid, but, as Rowan Williams puts it: 'delight in the beauty of God is the goal of our action'.

Rejoicing, joy, delight – these are the things that we are called to in Christ Jesus. These are the attributes of Glory. The road to glory might be strewn with hardship, suffering, and sacrifice, which is what John shows us in Jesus, but the self giving of Jesus does not conclude with the cross but with resurrection.

So as we scan the pages of John's gospel for a clearer vision of Jesus, we are forced to return to earlier sections. In accepting the death and resurrection of Jesus we begin participation in God and in the mission of Christ. A participation that is about making beauty a reality in the ugliness of human sin and wrongdoing, and that participation propels us forward to the beatific vision, the vision of God, a vision about which we have no words, except in the glimpses we sometimes catch when we are not concentrating too hard, moments when the truth of God appears to us in surprising ways, glimpses not merely of moral goodness but of Glory.

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