

In the beginning was the Word...

An Advent & Christmas Course from the Diocese of Aberdeen & Orkney



Glory

Sunday 10th December 2023



Le Triomphe du Christianisme sur le paganisme (1868, Gustav Doré) Public Domain

Today's Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11, Psalm 85.1-2,8-13, 2 Peter 3.8-15a, Mark 1.1-8

To Reflect:

Glory is a common word, both in our Bible, and in our liturgy. The “Gloria Patri” or “Great Doxology” which begins “Glory to the Father, and to the Son...” is said at almost every church service I can think of. Yet, if I was to ask someone at a service what the meaning of “The Glory of God” actually is, I can guarantee almost nobody would be able to give a coherent answer to that question. I doubt that many clergy would be able to trot out a succinct answer without screwing up their faces in thought.

It is a bit of an oddity: We say “glory” so often, we have often overlooked its meaning. From an academic point of view, we can look to the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament for some clues to its meaning. In Greek (the main language of the New Testament), the word is “δόξα” or “doxa”, from where we get the word “doxology”. This usually gets translated to “glory” in English, yet it covers a multitude of meanings.

The Jewish Hebrew literal meaning is something quite simple: a heaviness or weight. So King Solomon’s wealth could have been described as “glorious”. How could this be applied to God? We cannot measure God, we cannot even qualitatively describe God. We are using a word to describe the indescribable.

Until the coming of Jesus, humanity struggled to appreciate this Godly glory first hand. Adam and Eve were able to “walk with God”, yet He appeared to them as a man; perhaps as much God as they could handle. The

prophets gave us snippets of God in what they told the people. Even Moses was told in Exodus 33:22: “and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by”. Clearly a full measure of glory is too much for us.

In Jesus, as both man and God, His disciples had a safer view of this glory. The New Testament has this glory as encompassing a brightness and splendour, a power and strength, and a majesty and honour. Never is this fully revealed, Jesus’s followers, although they begin to understand the character and love of God, they are unable to fully appreciate that mind-blowing greatness that would otherwise overwhelm them.

“Glimpse” seems to be the word that inevitably comes with the glory of God; we will never fully “get it”, we can only take so much of this infinite greatness in one go. From the beginning of the Incarnation, when Mary conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, she extolled this greatness through the words of the Magnificat - the Song of Mary. The contrast could not be more stark: The humility of His handmaid contrasted with the might of His arm.

It is an interesting paradox that amongst all this glory is God as a defenceless child, whose birth we are anticipating in Advent. A glory that levels mountains and valleys is written about in our Isaiah reading for today, that enters the world through the person of a baby. In today’s Gospel reading, John the Baptist knows his own role is only as a messenger that prepares the way. He knows that Jesus is coming and his own greatness is nought as to that coming glory.

These glimpses, contrasting God’s glory with the human, pepper the New Testament: the miracles, Jesus’s baptism, the transfiguration, all leading to the most glorious crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

At all points these are not displays of uncontrolled power, instead they are careful revelations. God has His own timeline and reserves His mystery as His glory is revealed. In the meantime, as Christians, we need faith to bridge these revelations of glory into a hope of God’s Kingdom when we are no longer glimpsing God, but are able to be with and look upon Him always.

Because God resides in us, the incarnation of God resides beyond Jesus’s time on Earth. We, ourselves, can reflect God’s glory. It is in the nature of Christian mission that it too gives glimpses of God’s glory through our own words and actions.

In Peter’s epistle, he looks forward to this time when Jesus returns, but also reminds us that God’s infinite glory is not just one of power and space, but of time. In waiting amongst the mystery of divine revelation, knowing we are already over two thousand years from Jesus’s birth, we are shown the glory of God’s unchanging eternal nature.

Despite God’s eternal nature, humanity’s nature is finite. Advent is a time of looking forward to the birth of Christ in Jesus’s first coming, but also allows us to reflect on the second coming when God will be finally revealed to all humanity in His full glory. We can only dream of what that might be like. Many artists have tried, and I include a painting by Gustav Doré, depicting this return, for contemplation.

I hope, that like at the ending Dante’s “La Divina Commedia” when Dante enters God’s throne room in paradise, that our eyes, mind, and spirit will be ready to gaze upon the triune God in His full glory.

To pray

I encourage us to consider Simeon’s song, the “Nunc Dimittis”, in prayer, when Simeon finally feels ready to meet God. I see it as a hopeful prayer, in having glimpsed the glory of God in His son, Jesus, we may be readied in hope for our own time in eternity:

Now, Lord, you have kept your word: let your servant go in peace.

With my own eyes I have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people:
a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

To listen

I offer the “Gloria Patri” from Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Magnificat”, BWV 243 as an expression of both Mary’s hope as the Mother of God, and as a reflection of God’s glory.

(One recording is Monteverdi Choir & English Baroque Soloists conducted by John Eliot Gardiner 1983, released by Philips Digital Classics – G2 11458, another is by Collegium Vocale Gent

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0THnkhjc546Io1OxfEdIRO?si=2af05160598b4c50>)

...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.