



21 March 2015

Strange Glory (John 12. 20-33)

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Last week, I was given a new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'Strange Glory'. I haven't started the book yet, but I thought of its title when I read the gospel set for this week. 'Glory' is a central theme for John – but it is a 'strange glory' indeed. In this gospel, to be 'glorified' always means to be 'humiliated'; to be 'lifted up' means to be 'laid low'; 'human glory' is always contrasted with 'the glory that comes from God' (John 12.43), which seems to be no glory at all.

This week we come to the final reflection in our Lenten series *Metanoia*, in which we've been exploring the deeper dimensions of the call to repent. We have been focusing on habits of mind and heart, taken for granted patterns and frameworks that form us and determine how we experience and respond to the world. We've noticed that these 'thoughts' often lock us in mentalities of scarcity or threat; they alienate us from ourselves, from one another and from God. The call to repent involves becoming aware of them and letting them, and ourselves be changed as we come into the light of God's transforming grace.

We have also acknowledged that this process is often painful or disorienting, taking us into unknown territory and often, fearfully, by way of our wounds. So today we come finally to the repentance that undergirds or constitutes the ground for all of this. It's the call to change our minds concerning God, to be drawn into a transformed relationship with God. Without this, we have no access to the trust and spiritual maturity that is the condition of everything else. According to John's gospel, it is to create the possibility of this repentance that Jesus died.

Let's start with our gospel reading. Jesus is apparently at the height of his powers. He's recently raised Lazarus from the dead and has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. A 'great crowd' has acclaimed him with palm branches and cries of hosanna, and even the Pharisees acknowledge their eclipse. They say to one another: "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" News of Jesus has reached abroad, beyond the people of Israel. Among those who have come up to worship at the festival are 'some Greeks' who approach Philip saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus". Here is church growth on an international scale. At last, this little movement is gaining traction, having an impact.

What does Jesus do? Immediately he hears about the Greeks who wish to see him, we are told, 'Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"'. What does glory look like? Like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. At the very moment of his triumph, Jesus refuses it – at least in any terms his disciples, or we, understand. It's not as if this is straightforward for Jesus. 'Now my soul is troubled', he goes on to say. But he's also (as John portrays him) clear. 'It is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name'. Strange glory ... It looks a lot like failure and dereliction. Yet, Jesus proclaims, in yielding to this death, the painfully ironic 'lifting up' that is crucifixion, 'the ruler of this world will be driven out' and God will be glorified, made known and honoured. What's going on here? And what does it mean for us?

In the words of theologian Mark McIntosh, what's going on is 'God's action to *embrace* the very status (slavery, humiliation, and death) that [we] most fear'. That is how the ruler of this world is driven out. By willingly undergoing them, Jesus reveals that the power of death and all its proxies – shame, humiliation, failure, being wrong, ordinariness, illness, despair, threat, and fear – cannot limit God's life and (in the resurrection) have no power to determine how God wills to be towards us. All these painful things that we think get in the way – of life, of being loved, being accepted, having a part to play – all these things are revealed to have no power to determine

the way God is towards us. Love is stronger than death, and God (so it turns out) *is* love.

That *should* feel like good news. Even so, there's part of us that wants a different God. We want a God who's more in control, more triumphal, less suffering servant than commander-in-chief. We want a God who can wave a wand and make it better, or at least one we can blame for our sufferings. We don't want the strange glory of the living God, who works in and through broken-heartedness and failure. We want something more consistent with our worldly systems of meaning, success and power.

But if we are truly to be followers of Jesus, capable of participating with him in the reconciliation of all things, then we must change our mind about God, repent of our projections onto God. The disciples resisted this *metanoia*: they had hoped for a restoration of Israel, positions of power and influence in the new age, the fire of judgement from heaven for their enemies. Rowan Williams writes: 'Jesus in yielding to his failure, his appalling mortality, finally refuses these projections – as if only *by* this failure of all that has been fantasized and longed for can he at last "say" what is to be said; as if the silence of his dying is the only rhetoric for his gospel'.¹ Strange glory; almost not good news ...

What does it mean? It means we are *empowered* to repent of our sins. We may dare to be vulnerable, acknowledge our failure, shame, doubt, self-loathing, and woundedness, because Jesus has undergone what we most fear to suffer and embodied what we most fear to be. In so doing, he has revealed to us the love and endless mercy of the Father. He has created the way for us to follow, the means of dying into life.

And it means we are *called* to repent of our sins, including our infantile projections and fantasies about God, so that we may grow to maturity, to the

¹ Rowan Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 270.

measure of the full stature of Christ. In so doing, and only in so doing, we may join with Jesus in offering our lives for the reconciliation and liberation of the world.

So I would like to invite you to join me now in writing the conclusion to our Lenten series on repentance ... a conclusion that can only be written in and through our lives ...

As many of you know, 18 months ago Neil and I walked the Camino de Santiago. About 200km before Santiago, at the highest point of the Way, there is an iron cross, Cruz de Ferro, and underneath it an enormous pile of stones. The stones represent the burdens that pilgrims for over a thousand years have carried to this point, and then laid down. It is an extraordinarily moving place – you turn a corner and see before you a huge mound of stones – the sins and sufferings of humanity. Tonight we have an opportunity to lay down a stone, representing the burden of sin and suffering that we are carrying.

Take a moment to be present to what has come to you this Lent as your burden of sin and suffering, the constrictions of your mind and heart ...

And when you are ready, if you wish to, come forward and lay it down ...

Closing Prayer: Merciful God, accept these our sins and our suffering brought to the foot of the cross ... Transform them into the means of deepened life for us; transform us into the means of abundant life for the world ... For your name's sake and for your glory ... Amen.