

Epiphany 2
16/1/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 62:1-5
John 2:1-11

Seeing the World Full of Glory

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

This is the kind of question which entertains undergraduate philosophy majors for hours and days on end. (Philosophy undergraduates like I was almost a decade ago.)

There's actually quite a clever answer to this age-old question if you read a few complicated philosophy books: *yes*. As it turns out, yes a tree does make a sound when it falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it. Case closed.

One of the philosophical reasons for saying yes to this question is actually kind of interesting. In some schools of thought within philosophy they talk about the idea of "adumbration." In a technical philosophical sense, this big, strange word "adumbration" refers to the fact that human beings only ever *perceive* the world in part, and yet *experience* the world as a rich and seamless whole.

I may only be able to see your masked up faces from one perspective, and yet I have no doubt that if I were to walk around the room I would find that you are, nevertheless, three dimensional people. And not just cardboard cut-outs set up for my amusement.

So too, when I speak to someone, I may only grasp a tiny piece of who they are in conversation, but I experience them as a full human being: with interests and passions; family, friends and acquaintances; regrets and hopes.

At its best - indeed at our best - the world and its people are experienced as full, as something to be discovered, as an inexhaustible opening to adventure. Even though our small experience of the world is only ever partial, fragile, and fleeting.

And so it is that the philosopher says the tree which falls with no one around, acts in the same way as the one which falls in front of me. There are no gaps in reality, only bits we haven't yet seen.

Our reading from John's Gospel invites us into something like this experience of "adumbration," this experiencing of the world as a seamless whole, even though we only ever see it in part.

The basic story is fairly straightforward: Jesus is invited, along with his mum, to a wedding. The hosts run out of wine. So Jesus does what any self-respecting incarnate Word of God would do in the same situation ... and turns the water from six large stone jars into wine. This wine, as it turns out, is a marvelous hit with the wedding host and the whole party rejoices.

The point of this miraculous act, we are told, was so that Jesus could reveal his glory.

Here, however, we only glimpse the glory of Jesus in a partial and fragmentary way. If the point of this miracle story is that it reveals Christ's glory, why is it that we are also told that only the servants and disciples saw the miracle, but *not* the chief steward and the bridegroom — and presumably the other guests?

We might ask: If a miracle is performed, and no one important is there to see it, does it reveal Christ's glory?

Here we are only supposed to glimpse the glory of Jesus in a partial and fragmentary way. We are, as it were, thrown off the scent of what we might initially think glory is all about. Glory is not about flashy shows of power, about clear signs that God in Jesus Christ can command the world of creation at will, bending it to his every will. Rather, glory is about servants seeing the new wine being poured into old wine skins - or perhaps old water jars. Glimpsing glory is about the first fruits of reconciliation. Glory is about the wonder and anticipation of meeting Jesus, this remarkable person, and believing in this One: glimpsing glory leads the first disciples - and us as disciples - to the beginnings of belief, the beginnings of the journey of following Jesus.

In other words, what is seen only by some, only partially, only in ways which are confusing and strange: what is seen in part, becomes an invitation into the whole. This is the importance of today's reading from John 2 within the broader arc of Gospel narrative: it is the entry point into the journey which will unfold as the Gospel narrative carries on. And so this strange story is an invitation to us, to step into this journey as well. Not simply to keep reading John's Gospel, but to be enticed into following the strange way of this Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

Here Jesus' performs a miracle not to demonstrate his power, but to lay out bread crumbs, to release a sweet perfume, to open our ears and eyes to wonder.

Look at this one who performs miracles that spark joy in the world!

Look at this one who invites servants and fishermen into the secret of his renewal!

Look at this one whose glory is seen only partially, so that we might be invited on the journey to see the whole world as filled with glory!

The disciples see a sign of the beginning of renewal -- but only the beginning -- so that they may appreciate that they too will be caught up in Christ's renewing work. They see this miraculous sign of Jesus exerting power over natural things, so that they know all of creation will be renewed by Jesus' merciful might. They see at a wedding in Cana only a tiny piece of Jesus' strange way: and this invites them into discovery, into an inexhaustible adventure. This is the point of today's reading: it piques our curiosity and wonder, so that we lean into the world transforming glory which Jesus will ultimately bring at the appointed hour.

In today's reading Jesus tells his mother that his hour has not yet come. Jesus' mother will not re-appear in John's Gospel until this hour does come.

The hour in which the celebration of the party guests is turned to the mocking of the crowd.

The hour in which the sweet wine of miraculous joy is turned into the sour wine of persecution.

The hour when the water of purification flows from the vessel of Christ's body, through his pierced side.

This too is what we are invited into; this too is glory.

The task which is set before us by today's reading, and by the Scriptures which we read together week after week, is to adopt a posture of seeking out God's glory at work in the world. At times this is strange, wondrous, and joyous. At times this is a bitter fruit, and suffering -- which we know all too well in the current crisis. And yet the task is to look beyond the immediate experiences which stand right before us, and recall that while we see only in part the world is a seamless whole, history is a seamless whole, creation is a seamless whole. And it is God who holds all things together, it is Christ the Word through whom all things are made, it is the Spirit of God which nourishes us and beckons to us: what we see in partial ways will be used for God's glory; what we feel as fragile will be caught up and transformed into new life; what we grasp at and which seems only fleeting will be held in the very heart of God.

For glory is all around us, but it is not first and foremost the miracle, but glory is found through faith in the one who leads us, who bids us to begin the daily journey towards glory and light and love.
