

Lent 3  
12/3/2023

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 5:1-11

Psalm 95

John 4:5-42

May we Rise Now in Glory

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

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

I recently sat in on a liturgy class. I was there to help facilitate a discussion on contemporary issues in liturgy within the context of the Uniting Church — as often happens in the best classes freewheeling discussion ensued. One of the questions that was posed was what to make of the Uniting Church President's prayer at the death of the Queen.

I confess I had mixed feelings about the Queen's death, and so opted to disengage from much of the mourning rituals, and reflections on her life and what she represented (both positive and negative). Nevertheless, when put on the spot, what to say?

The question came from the perspective of someone formed in a non-western context where their country has been shaped by colonisation. And accompanying this colonisation the suffering, oppression, and violence which always accompanies colonisation - and the blind eye turned to unspeakable violence.

I remember their question framed by this comment:

“When I came to Australia I did not join the Anglican Church, because I opened the Prayer Book and there was a prayer that said of the Queen, ‘may her enemies be vanquished.’ ... I am her enemy.”

This is not the too often simple rejection of the Western led order of the world offered by some on the political left. This is a visceral, lived insight: some of the greatest tragedies in this person's country happened during my parents' lifetime.

When we pray we direct ourselves towards God. We seek after God's presence alone. A Rabbi I once heard even described communal prayer as being “alone together.” Sat or standing before God to express our deepest selves, to express truths so deep that we must borrow the best words of our tradition, lest we simply offer sighs too deep for words. And yet whenever we pray the whole world is gathered together: we bring ourselves, and we ourselves are a bundle of the histories which have shaped us and shaped our world. The most honest prayers lay bare the world before God.

And so, it is right to ask what social, and political assumptions frame the words we pray.

This sermon is not the answer I gave in class, but perhaps it can be a contribution to taking the concerns of every one of our sisters, brothers, and siblings in the Church seriously. I am only beginning to learn that the questions asked by many in our minority cultural communities are vital for the life of the Church, because they free us from the ways our majority culture can narrow our vision of God.

What does it mean to say “Glory” in the Christian tradition? What does it mean to pray that someone may rest in peace, and rise in *glory*?

“We are justified by faith, we have peace with God ... we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ... we boast in our afflictions ... affliction produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint ... God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 5.1-5)

In Romans chapter 5 the Apostle Paul gathers up the argument he has been making in the preceding 4 chapters. From tracing how deep the problem of sin truly is -- so deep it infects everything, shapes everyone, so deep down it’s in the water table! To the gracious release that only Christ can offer us through faithfulness. All of this is gathered together in the short verses from the beginning of Romans 5, which then point to the next turn in the argument.

Paul’s point seems to be to take seriously the completeness of Jesus Christ’s salvific work, while recognising the gap between the proclamation of salvation and our tangible experience of it. If Jesus’ death has in fact released the world from the bondage of sin, then why is so much in the world still clearly marked by sin and its effects?

We might phrase this question in another way: how do we hold to the hope of resurrection when there are crucified bodies all around us?

For Paul we begin to answer this question when we recognise that the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ is not first and foremost about God’s abandonment of a world marked by suffering. Rather, salvation is our release from being shaped by the forces of sin and death, and so that we are new people in the midst of a suffering world which God is redeeming. What we inhabit is not a magical solution to all the world’s ills, as if every problem can simply be ignored or wiped clean, without the hard work of reconciliation and healing. Rather, we inhabit a new situation in which God is revealed in and through the suffering of the world, as the one who will never abandon the least or the last. We are in a new situation in which we are shaped by the outpouring of the Spirit which is transforming each of us, and the whole world.

What, then, do we boast in? We do not boast in ourselves, marked as each of us are by the painful histories of ourselves as individuals, our families in their complexity, our wider society, and the degradation of the world itself. We boast instead, says Paul, in affliction, in suffering. Not because affliction and suffering are in themselves good: by no means! We boast in affliction because it recalls us to solidarity with each person who suffers, and the whole suffering world. We boast in affliction if and when it recalls the solidarity which Jesus himself lived on behalf of all of humanity, and all of creation.

This is glory. Glory *is* the cross. Glory is the gathering of the whole wretched world in the afflicted person of Jesus, who represents humanity to God and receives righteousness and justification on our behalf.

So it is that to receive the glory of God means sharing in the suffering of Christ which puts on display God’s love for a wretched world. Let me be clear: when we speak of a wretched world we can never mean a world which is bad and which God seeks to abandon, a world in which we should think of ourselves as worms. When we speak of a wretched world we speak of a world in which everything is marked by a march towards death, where from our first waking moments we enter cycles of trauma, where we live in stolen land, where we are shaped by anxieties, insecurities, abuses, and disregard. What Christ gathers into himself is this world beset by tragedy, and embraces it so thoroughly that the tragedy ceases, and yet we who are formed in and by this tragedy do not cease.

This is the glory of God: who embraces the affliction of the world and forges from it a new humanity, bound together by bonds of love and not animosity. This is the glory of God: who invites us into the afflictions of the world so that we too become agents of transformation and new life. This is the glory of God: that the hard edges of the world might be cast aside, and yet not a single soul can be left out or abandoned.

Glory is being bound to each other, being stitched into the tapestry of love which gathers all of the troubled world into a new beginning. This new beginning, this rising in glory is the ongoing work of living into what is true:

We have been justified by faith, we have peace with God. May we boast in sharing in the afflictions of the world, for this is true glory, and the redemption of the cross.

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