

26th March 2023, 5th Sunday of Lent, 'Let your light shine' – John 11:38-53 'Glory'

Many years ago, when I was working in my old commercial job, I felt the Lord call me to pray intentionally for two years for 100 people in my workplace to become Christians. That's quite a big prayer, but I really sensed this was something that God wanted me to do. So, three times a week I prayed, I walked round the outside of the building at lunchtime, I fasted sometimes, I prayed about particular people on the train to and from work, and half way through the first year I ran an alpha course in the office. One person marvellously came to faith – and almost immediately left the company. But it was a start – and I kept praying, and fasting, and walking, and praying....

Towards the end of the second year, I was sat late at night reflecting on the experience. To the best of my knowledge, I didn't know of anyone else who had come to faith – and I had some hard questions for God. Lord, I said, I did exactly what you asked of me – I prayed in faith, week after week, I fasted, I ran an evangelistic course, I *couldn't* run any others because the company didn't allow me to, and the two years is nearly up – I can't see the results?!

While I was pouring my heart out before the Lord, I opened the bible, which fell open at this page and my eyes went straight to the verse at the heart of our passage today – John 11:40: Jesus said, 'Did not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' At first I felt this was some kind of rebuke: things didn't happen because I didn't believe enough. But then I realised that the Lord was trying to tell me something else, something about **what glory really looks like**.

You see the passage doesn't stop after Lazarus is raised from the dead. That is the obvious sign of God's glory being revealed – and it changes the lives of, not just Lazarus, but many people watching it. However, it also seals Jesus' fate: as we heard, what happens next is that the Pharisees meet, agree that Jesus is now too much of a threat to their comfortably compromised power structures, and decide to do away with him, whenever the opportunity arises. Although this is human wickedness, John makes it clear that it is also prophetic, within the will of God – because **glory is not just about the obvious and visible miracles**.

In fact the next mention of glory in John is very different – in the following chapter, 12:23, Jesus declares to the crowd: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*.' **How? We know the answer to that: in disgrace, on a cross, wrongly convicted and virtually alone. This is glory.**

And suddenly, as I sat there in my lounge at midnight, I had peace. When the Lord pointed me to that Scripture, he was reminding me that there are two types of glory in the Christian life: there's the miracles and the mountaintop stuff, which we all long for, and rightly so... and **there's an even greater glory: the glory of sacrifice and service, the glory of faithfulness**, the peace that comes from knowing that you did what God asked, whatever it was. If you're anything like me, it's not the glory that most of us choose, or perhaps even want – but it's glory as the Lord defines it; it's glory as John describes it; it's glory as Jesus lives it. It is the glory which reflects the true heart of God.

'I didn't say that you would see 100 people come to faith,' the Lord reminded me. 'I called you to *pray* that 100 would. And they will – but the timing of that is up to me.' To this day, I firmly believe that I will see at least 100 of my colleagues in heaven – I may not have seen that happen in that two-year period, but the fruit of that, the timing of that, the glory of that, is up to the Lord, and not to me.

As we reflect on this passage today, I want us to take heart. God's definition of glory goes beyond miracles and mountaintops: **God revealed his greatest glory in the life of Jesus at the point of his death.** And our God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Very few of us, thankfully, are called to be martyrs – but in the small ways that we sacrifice ourselves, for his sake, the Lord reveals his glory. God values our servant heartedness, God sees it, and God glorifies – and our task is to keep trusting that God really is in the hard things we offer, and not just miracles and the mountaintops.

Did I not tell you, Jesus says to each one of us, that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? It may not be the sort of testimony that gets attention, though that kind of story is always good to share. But God's glory is also revealed in our faithful, dogged persistence to serve, despite the challenges and the hardships along the way. Glory is ultimately the tangible sense of God's presence – and many of us can testify that we have often sensed that most powerfully in the hard times, rather than the easy ones. That's how glory works. As Jesus says later in chapter 12: 'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'

So may the Lord reveal his glory in all of our lives this week. May he bind our wounds, may he lift our spirits, and above all, may we know that, if we have to walk a hard path at present, it is *there* that the Lord reveals his greatest glory. Amen.