

Fifth Sunday of Easter

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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

How do we consider the idea of 'glory'? I am reminded of a phrase in the British national anthem, 'Send her victorious, onward and glorious'. What does the idea of glory mean to you in this context? Is it different or the same as the word Jesus uses to describe himself, when he says he has been 'glorified'? Reading this text today, the meaning of the word 'glory' and the idea of being 'glorified' may become more complex and entwined with conflict when we think of national identity and the places where lines of faith and national identity cross.

Perhaps consider if there are some hymns, or songs, or tunes that move you with the concept of national glory or of the glory of the divine? Is there a place these overlap for you?

It is a short reading, so read slowly, or maybe more than once, and consider how you feel about glory in all its forms.

Text

John 13:31–35

The New Commandment

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Comment

I am a minister in the Church of Scotland, which has traditionally not been seen as

an ‘established’ church but rather a free body independent of parliamentary control in all matters spiritual. The royal family would be mere members like any other member of the church and subject to the discipline of Kirk Session, Presbytery and General Assembly like any other member.

Despite having this clear from the start, it has been the cause of bitter feuds over the years. Much of the conflict within the Church of Scotland has been about the tension between secular government and the courts of the church: from the Reformation of 1560; to the Disruption of 1832; the unification of the Church of Scotland and the United Free church which caused the passing of the Scotland Act of 1921 which said that the church was independent of the state. Even up to the present day while the case of *Percy (AP) v Church of Scotland Board of National Mission* 2005 which proved that appointments were under civil jurisdiction and employment tribunals still maintained the right of the church to make appointments, but not the freedom to administer such appointments in contradiction of civil law or civil employment rights.

In all this fighting for freedom from the state the Church has within it a conflict of identity about in what way we relate to the royal family, politicians, and the apparatus of state. For some the idea of glory is still connected to a royal visit or a royal person, for others glory may only be interpreted in a spiritual sense, to be the glory of God alone.

While the church may fight to maintain its independence from the state at every turn, in fact for some ministers and members contact with the state is prized and valued, such as the visit of the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly each year, representing the monarch and acting as an observer of the Assembly on her behalf.

Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being ‘glorified’ and of that glory emanating from God. He also tied the idea of his glory with the thought of his death and departure from the earth. When we translate ideas of glory into our human political contexts we may at times lose sight of his following commandment which is not to seek glory nor to praise it, but rather to love one another.

In the national anthem the idea of glory is still tied to the concept of victory. Do we unite ‘glorious’ and ‘victorious’ when we talk of glory? Is it that moment of jubilation when we win a fight that is often the root cause of a conflict yet to come? Can we think of conflicts which have been resolved without a puff of victory? How did that feel? Or perhaps you remember a conflict where you were delighted, jubilant, to win? Was that the end of the matter?

Is it possible to leave glory to god alone, and choose to follow the commandment to love one another? Or, in your context, do you feel that is not likely? Or perhaps it is not desirable?

Response

Read Norman MacCaig’s poem ‘Progress’, the reference is in the further reading section below. In it the poet writes of the experience of the ordinary soldier going off to war. He sets a contrast between the idea of glory and the reality of hardship for many.

*When the armies marched off,
cursing the criminal stupidity of their leaders,
to fight for the glory and prosperity
of the motherland,
the leaders
did their bit
by putting the prices up;*

How do you respond to this connection of ideas? Does it reframe the idea of glory for you as it did for the poet?

What is the key to understanding the role of glory in conflict?

How does a human idea of glory reflect Jesus' commandment to 'love one another'?

Prayer

Dear God, I want none of earthly glory,
if that is simply to set people apart
and estrange us one from another.
I seek no victory if that is to puff up pride
and deepen division.
Enable me to love my fellow humans
with a love that fulfils your commandment to love.
Through this love alone
may I be seen to be your disciple,
in the name of the son of humanity,
Amen