

Let us begin and finish with glory. For glory is at the heart of our service this morning. Glory is seen by Elisha as he watches Elijah go up into heaven. Glory is the vision of the church because God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Glory is seen above all in the revelation of Christ at the transfiguration, unhindered glory that reduces the onlookers to terror for they are seeing God.

Glory is found in the creation, and when we look into heavens or around us, we see images of Glory. Glory is in the burning, fiery furnace, in the lion's den where oppression had its heat quenched and its mouth stopped by the Glory of God.

Glory is seen in the baby of Bethlehem proclaimed by angels and worshipped by shepherds. Glory is seen in a crucified man outside Jerusalem where no light shines. Glory is seen in the empty tomb, women rejoicing, apostles proclaiming, in Pentecostal fire and in a community of strangers called Christians. Glory shines in the church who love one another across difference. Glory is seen in every human being, of all races and colours, abilities and knowledge, gender and sexuality, indigenous or new arrivals. Where we do not recognise the Glory of God in each other as we struggle against sin, and seek to proclaim the good news of Jesus, then we fall short, and must fear.

For Glory will be seen in Christ's return to judge each and all.

Glory does not depend on us; we can neither make it nor extinguish it, Glory transforms everything, exists not instrumentally, but consequentially. It exists because God is.

And that takes us to Racial Justice Sunday.

In 1955, as most will know better than I, Mrs Rosa Parkes refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. A few days later, as a boycott of city buses grew amongst people of colour, Dr Martin Luther King Jr gave one of his earliest great addresses:

"And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. ... If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. Love has no meaning. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

See how he takes the superficially mundane matter of a bus boycott and shows that what it is about is the Glory of God and the truth of Christ.

There is nothing mundane about injustice at any level, in any society. To be unjust is to close our eyes and turn our backs on the Glory of God. To be unjust is to put God at our level, to make Glory just another aspect of the life we control, to render Glory according to our estimate of priorities and desires.

This is the language of the Church of England's Racial Justice Commission, whose 4th report is out. It demands justice in the church; it requires

action in repentance, resources and change: if the church denies Glory through any injustice at all, then what hope for the world?

The report is urgent. It points to our sin, so long known, so easily tolerated. It gives little praise, because seeking to stop doing harm is not a virtue but a response, in all areas of sin or abuse. Yet it does not sow condemnation but sets direction in response to the Glory of God.

It will certainly be condemned by some, called 'derived from Marxism' or other false doctrines, treated as the impertinent demands of others who are not us, who do not understand. The history of the Commission members will be examined, dissected and demeaned. Of course, this is not the 1950s Deep South, it is the UK in 2024, the most diverse nation on earth, and generally comfortable with diversity. Thank God for change.

Yet the Glory of God illuminates all equally and reveals that differences of all kinds are always seeking to become more important than the Glory of God.

Eight years after Montgomery, Dr King wrote a letter from Birmingham Jail. It was in answer to the complaints of moderate and reasonable men (all men, this is 1963) who were pastors of churches. They had written to Dr King asking him to desist from protest, because of the risks of disorder, that he was "unwise and untimely", he was "an outsider coming in". He wrote in reply:

"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea."

"An inescapable web of mutuality, a single web of destiny". That applies to the UK as much as the USA then.

Glory's great light holds within it justice, mercy, transformation, equality, compassion, sacrificial love, suffering – it shines with the very nature of God. It is inescapable, we are part of its web: we cannot use "what aboutery?" point to others, for the Glory of God shines here.

Glory is not tidy, nor orderly in human terms. Glory and justice claim all that we are, they propel us into justice, they have no limit to bandwidth, we cannot say "we are too busy for this or that". Yet Glory is merciful and kind as, like Peter in terror, we express idiocies, as we fall short today.

Glory draws law and prophecy into transfiguration and holds out its gifts and graces for us to receive, and to show the image of God.

In Glory is the promise of a change in nation and world, war to peace, slavery to freedom, grief to joy. In God's unspeakable Glory we may become more clearly his image, his light in our world.

Amen.

5 min read