

Kington Baptist Church

MESSAGE BOARD – 94

To explain something about the mystery of the resurrection of the body, St Paul makes use of a number of illustrations; one such illustration is the wonders of the planets and stars.

There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. (1 Corinthians 15.40-41)

In recent days we've certainly been made aware of the glory of the sun! And just now, as I write, we've the wonderful sight of the glory of the so-called buck-moon – a full, bright and spectacularly large moon in a clear sky.

But all this raises a deeper question about glory. We're increasingly familiar with the glory of the sun, moon, and stars – we know more about the glory of such heavenly bodies than Paul could ever have imagined. But in all likelihood we know less about the glory of God than did Paul!

And this is the deeper question: *the glory of God?* I wonder what you think of when you hear or read those words: *the glory of God*. It's generally the case that we think through pictures. We hear of something and our minds form a picture of what it is we're thinking about. We hear the words '*the glory of God*' and our minds present us with a picture. I wonder what those pictures are. It may be the case that the sun is the most impressive idea we have of 'glory'. We think of glory and we think of *brightness* and *brilliance* and *intense light*. This seems also to have been in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews when he speaks about the glory of Jesus. He's concerned to stress that Jesus is truly the divine Son of God, in every way equal to the Father, equal to the Father's glory. And so he speaks about the brilliance of the glory of Christ – '*being the brightness of his glory, the exact image of his person*'. (Hebrews 1.3)

What then is this '*brightness of his glory*'? What is the essence, the true nature of the glory of God? It's often suggested that this brightness was the brightness seen in the transfiguration of Jesus, when he shone with dazzling brilliance. It's also said that this glory is seen in the great vision John writes of in the first chapter of Revelation: he sees Christ in glory, and is overwhelmed; he falls to the ground, like a dead man.

No doubt there's truth in all this. But to me it seems odd that the writer to the Hebrews, who stresses the absolute glory of Christ, would only have in mind a couple of glimpses of that glory, if those were the only instances in which the glory of Christ was made visible. This same writer emphasises that Christ was made like us in every way; he took flesh and blood like us.

So what is the glory of God? Is it this brilliance of intense light? Or is it the sight of Jesus seen by those among whom he lived? Does not John point in that direction: *'We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son of God, full of grace and truth'*? (John 1.14) Isn't the *glory* in the *grace*?

Maybe the ideas – the 'pictures' – we have of glory are more to do with nature than grace. Maybe our ideas of glory veer too much towards ideas of 'pomp and circumstance' – of worldly display and material splendour. Are we not to expect the glory of Christ to be different from the world's idea of glory? Did not the Lord himself emphasise that he is 'meek and lowly of heart'? Does not the glory of Christ have more to do with grace and love and mercy? Isn't that the whole point of the scene described in Revelation chapter 5? John is told not to weep in despair, because the *'Lion of the tribe of Judah has triumphed'*. John turns to see the *'Lion of Judah'* but sees a *Lamb!* A Lamb bearing wounds of sacred sacrifice. This is glory! This is glory that eclipses the glory of the sun shining in full strength: *I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. ... I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus, who you are persecuting'*. (Acts 26.13-15)

Maybe we need to rethink our ideas of the glory of God. Maybe, instead of ideas of 'pomp and circumstance', our minds ought first to form images of love, mercy, grace, humility, unlimited giving and glorious generosity. Maybe we need to heed the words of Jesus at a deeper level; his dismissive assessment of riches, the splendour of riches, of fine clothes and food, of the snare and trap of riches and extravagant living. Do we not get a beautiful insight into the mind of Jesus and his estimate of what is truly glorious, as opposed to what is merely gaudy and 'showy' when he says *'consider the wild flowers in the field ... more glorious than Solomon in all his splendour'*! (Matthew 6.28-30) *This* is the aesthetic, culture, the values that occupy the sacred heart of Jesus!

The LORD passed before Moses, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...' (Exodus 34.6-7)

We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1.14) We see his glory in the humility of his mother, the impoverished circumstances of his birth, the humility and poverty of his life, and, above all, in the total self-giving of the Cross: *I will never boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.* (Galatians 6.14)

John tells us: *'no man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him'*. (John 1.18) No words could be more important if we want to understand something about the glory of God. Firstly, if we want to know the nature of the glory of God then we must look to Christ – for he *alone* reveals that glory. Secondly, the glory of Christ is, as we've seen, *'the bright outshining of the Father's glory'* – no less, no different. Therefore the glory of Christ, the glory of God seen in Christ, is not a diluted, 'second-hand', dimmed down version of the glory of

God; it is the full outshining of that glory – and therefore equally unfathomable, transcendent and incomprehensible.

God ‘appeared’ to certain people in Old Testament times. God ‘walked in the garden’ with Adam; he appeared to Joshua as a man dressed for battle; the Lord appeared to Abraham as three travelling men. To Solomon, Isaiah, Moses and Abraham God appeared in glory. But what did they see? Solomon saw a *cloud*, filling the newly dedicated temple. The cloud was so overwhelming that the priests were not able to continue their tasks. (1 Kings 8.11) Isaiah experienced the heavenly ‘temple’ filled with smoke. This cloud is known as the *Shekhinah presence of God* – God visible in the form of a *cloud*: nothing more ‘concrete’, nothing more ‘formed’ than a *cloud*. Moses saw the ‘*glory of God pass by*’ as the ‘*Lord descended in a cloud*’. (Exodus 34.5-6) That’s what he saw. God revealed himself to Moses not so much by a definable visible presence but by *word*: he declared his Name to Moses. Moses also saw the Lord in the burning bush. Or rather he *saw* a burning bush and *heard* the *voice of God*. Abraham saw a smoking, smouldering, clay-oven drifting past as God appeared to him. (Genesis 15.17)

All this directs us to think, to ‘see’, the glory of God not as a definable form but, if at all visible, as an *indefinable incandescence*: the *Shekhinah*.

Then comes Jesus – and *now* we see him! Now there’s this great emphasis on *seeing*. And what is seen was a man; a man who didn’t stand out in a crowd. Remember John the Baptist – the cousin of Jesus? He twice said ‘*I did not know him*’ – I didn’t recognise him in the crowd that came to be baptised. (John 1.31,33) John recognised him only because the Holy Spirit settled on him in the visible form of a dove. That’s still how it is. Jesus is recognised, his glory is seen, only as the Holy Spirit identifies him to us.

We end with this contrast. *To Moses the Lord said, ‘You cannot see my face; no one shall see me and live. As my glory passes by I will cover you with my hand, my face shall not be seen.’* (Exodus 33.20-23)

God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4.6)

Father, I will that those you have given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me. (John 17.24)

And what is seen?

One of the elders said to me, ‘Don’t weep. Look, the lion from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has won the victory and is able to open the book and break its seven seals.’ Then I saw, standing in the very centre of the throne and of the four living creatures and of the elders, a LAMB having been slaughtered. (Revelation 5.5-6)

‘Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1.36) Now we see what the glory is! **The Lamb slain!** He is the glory of God!