

Listen again to the last line of the brief reading we've heard this morning from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

"...it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

It seems to me that there is a remarkable religious beauty in Paul's language here. And yet, noting the beauty of the language, it is prefaced by what seems to be rather a stark contrast of those who have seen this gospel light, and those who have not – "those who are perishing", to use Paul's phrase. Certainly outside of the church, and increasingly within it, it is wondered whether in fact we want to draw those distinctions. And one consequence of that anxiety is to grow more sceptical about language which seems to be beautiful and yet, perhaps because it is religiously beautiful, seems to divide us. Do we want to claim to be those who see by such a light, or not? Dare we claim this? I'll leave you to answer that for ourselves. But I'd like to lead you through a reading of what Paul says here which might undercut everyone's anxieties here, and give us a different way of thinking about what Paul points to.

We begin by pulling apart Paul's lovely final phrases in order to discover their heart: ..."the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"

"In the face of Jesus Christ" seems clear enough, although Paul is being metaphorical here, for none of those to whom he writes have seen the face of Jesus. The sense of "in the face of Jesus Christ", then, is something like "as we look to Jesus Christ".

"The *light* of the knowledge..." – this is also fairly straight forward. Whatever this knowledge is it is something which illuminates, enlightens, clarifies, reveals. We don't have to agree with Paul that this knowledge is, indeed, "light" but we can easily understand what he means.

But now we come to the crux of Paul's statement: "the light of the knowledge of *the glory of God*". This is the heart of the "religious beauty" of the whole line, and yet also the moment at which clarity fades, and so where we are most likely to miss the point. For what is "the glory of God"? I suspect that most of us would struggle to be clear about this. "Glory" has associations of brightness, brilliance, attracting attention and worthy of adulation. The "glory of God" might then seem to have to do with God's "light";

think of the way in which God is often represented in pictures or films: when God speaks, it is from the centre of some brilliant glow in the clouds, or similar. There is nothing distinct about such portrayals of glory and, indeed, the glorious light may even seem to consume all things around it, so that distinction and definition decrease as the glory increases. So, while we understand the contrast of light and darkness, talking of God's glory doesn't bring us to anything very tangible. Talk of light and dark is characteristically religious talk, and part of that character is often the lack of clarity.

Yet, despite this fuzziness, the *idea* of glory is very strong in our religious speak: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord", "Angels from the realms of glory", "All glory, laud and honour to thee, redeemer king". In fact, the word "glory" appears in just under one quarter of the 800 or so songs in the most recent version of our hymn book. We are somehow full of the "glory" of God, or fascinated by it, yet what is it and, perhaps more importantly, why does it matter? How does it touch or affect us?

To give an answer here, we'll focus only on how "glory" operates for Paul here and in a few other places, for it is here that it takes its clearest form. If the question is "what is the glory of God" then, for Paul, the simple answer is "Jesus", although perhaps but not for the reason we might suspect. Jesus is the "glory of God", but not because of what the church has come to call his "divine" character, but because of his humanity.

This is the thing to understand – the thought to take away: the glory of God is here the perfected human being. At the start of our little reading from 2 Corinthians Paul spoke of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God". Here we seem to have another marvellous religious turn of phrase. But let's note the expression, "the image of God". Because of the other mystic and religious language floating around here we're likely to imagine that this, also, has something to do with the divinity of Christ. But recall the old creation story – in particular the creation of humankind in the first of the creation stories:

"God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1.26f).

The point of this recollection is to remind us that to be in the image of God is not to be divine, but to be

human. Paul knows this very well, and he allows his language the imprecision which all language has, but here the imprecision and the ambiguity becomes not something which obscures meaning but opens up new thoughts. To speak of Jesus as “the image of God” is not only to say that somehow “Jesus shows us what God is like”, but also to say that “Jesus shows us what we are to be like”. The trick of the language is that the same phrase does for Paul something which, for us these days, seem to be two quite opposite things. Whereas we tend to want to see Jesus as either human or divine – mundane or “special”, as “merely” human or as religiously significant – as the image of God he is both. The image of God is both what we are, and what God becomes for us, in Jesus.

This ought to be a thought which shakes the foundations of how we understand God, ourselves and our world.

I want to draw just one consequence of this in order to drive the point home, and to do this by picking up on a thought I offered last week regarding the crucifixion of Jesus. There, as we reflected on the possible meaning which might be found in human suffering, I remarked that Good Friday is, in the first instance, an utter disaster theologically and, to go a step further, in an important sense the point of a failure of God – *if indeed Jesus is who the church believes him to be*.¹ That needs more explanation than I can offer now,² but let us note just this: God “sends his Son” to call his people back to the covenant, and the Son is crucified. This is, surely, a black Friday, and not a good one.

Yet, it is this *crucified* Jesus who is “the image of God”, for Jesus himself is the perfected human being, whether teaching in Galilee, hanging on the cross, or risen on Easter morning. But let’s remain on Friday: all of this is to say that the crucified Jesus is the glory of God. “The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” is the light which shines not only from glorious Easter morning but from the cross. Whatever it means to speak about God’s glory, that apparently very *religious* idea has to do with the very *worldly* and apparently *irreligious* space of the executioner’s tree. The very mundane cross is the light of the world, and not Easter day only.

To tell the truth, I’m not entirely sure what to do with this thought. But I’m pretty sure that it’s right. It’s not clear what to do with it because such thinking shatters the ideas of the religious and the non-religious alike. It locates “the glory of God” not in heaven but on earth – and on earth at the very point of its separation from God. The meaning of the cross as the glory of God is probably not actually something we can do anything with, for it seeks rather to do something with us. It serves to prompt,

to provoke, to challenge, to question. It would ask us whether we locate God’s glory in the wrong place – perhaps in the aesthetics of worship or buildings, or the efficiencies in process and management, or in clarity of expression or intention, or in correctness of creed or doctrine. There may be a glory in these things, but it is only secondary. The cross as the glory of God suggests that we might have been distracted from what it means to exist in the “image of God” – thinking perhaps of an essence or a quality or characteristic inherent in us. We may indeed possess such a dignity, but in the mere possession it is not yet glorious, not yet the ethic or the path through life which is the calling to faithfulness in love and service.

If, to return to the beginning of our reading from Paul, there is a “veiling” of minds by the God of this age, if there are some who are “perishing”, it is because, as “non-believers” the crucifixion is only a failure to them, only mundane and worldly, or because, as “believers”, the glory of God is a comfortable yet an airy-fairy, non-specific way of speaking of we’re-not-sure-what.

In both cases the meaning of the story is missed. Here Paul celebrates that God is present and meets us even at the very point we seem most distant from him. At this point God’s true “image” is made perfect, and so God’s true glory seen in a man both caught up in human failure and yet free to deny it ultimate power and to stay true to a higher calling and power.

This tragic little blip on the radar of world history is the point where God and the world truly meet, as they both are: God free for the world, that the world might be freed for life in God.

By the grace of God, may that meeting place be made real again for us today, that in our struggles, our pain, our mourning – and our rejoicing – we too might know such a presence of God and become – even us! – the glory of God.

Amen.

¹ That is, if Jesus is “God”, then God fails to convince his people to join him along the Way, which is surely the point of Jesus’ engaging with the people at all.

² Although all are welcome to come to one of the discussion groups next week to learn more!