

The Praise of His Glory

How do we go about being God's people, both in our individual lives and in our community life? None of us would be gathered in this room if that question in various forms were not important to us. In one way or another, we are searching for the God who is searching for us. Though we tend to read over it without reflection, our reading today from Ephesians (1.3-14) helps give an answer. Paul writes: "...we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." Seems a little puzzling, doesn't it? The operative words here are praise and glory, so let's spend a little time thinking about them.

Praise. The dictionary defines praise as "an expression in speech of approval, admiration, or honor." (Oxford English Dictionary) Pretty straight-forward, I think. Why is it that such a major thinker as Paul, not to mention countless successors in theological thinking, puts praise at the heart of the relationship between God and humanity? First, we have to acknowledge and then leave behind the abuses of praise, the abuses that color our perception of it. We are suspicious of praise because it is often demanded by people who are unworthy of it: dictators, politicians, petty tyrants in our personal and working lives, the insecure, those hungry for fame, and many more. The demand for praise here is a form of power and control. Then, when our great thinkers about God talk of praising Him, that recommendation is tainted by this experience. We have to put the abuse behind us so that we can properly appreciate the right use.

The second abuse is a religious one, the unreflecting exclamation of "Praise God," or "Praise the Lord" in situations from the profound to the trivial by people who seem to think that this sort of blathering is meaningful. Thoughtful people recoil from this sort of shallow enthusiasm. So we need to put aside our aversion to this glib religiosity to discover that there are some occasions where praise is meaningful and powerful. What else could it be when referring to God?

Why praise? Simply because we have nothing else to give God. Reality is the poverty of the creature before our Creator, who possesses everything, who has made everything. How do you give a gift to someone who has everything? The religious answer is simply to express the admiration that the honored one deserves. God doesn't need my money, my incense, my bull-calf, my first-born child, or anything else that I might think to give Her. What God does covet is a free and true relationship between Himself and Her creature. For the poverty-stricken creature, all we have is our honest admiration for the perfection of our God. Hence, praise. It is really all we have to give, all that God prizes, the thing that God does not automatically possess, unless we give it willingly.

Glory. So what is glory about? It is a word and concept that we seldom use outside of church and scripture, and therefore it has little meaningful content, unless we consciously add content to the word. That same dictionary says glory, among other things, is about splendor; a resplendent majesty, beauty, or magnificence; a splendid radiance of light. In religion, we use the word for God, for God's presence, for God's intent, for God's person, for those associated with God in a special way. In less religious senses we use glory or its adjectives about natural beauty (sunrises and sunsets, the Grand Canyon, a perfect rose) or something powerfully meaningful (the birth of a child, one person's sacrifice of her life for another, the conception of freedom and equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence). Glory is a beauty and a power that lifts us beyond ourselves into a realm in which we do not properly belong, but into which we have been invited and made at home. We can begin to see that glory belongs naturally to God and that it does contain meaning: beauty, splendor, light, goodness. We're just not used to thinking about it very much.

How do we go about being God's people? Saint Paul was not wide of the mark when he wrote "...we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." We don't have to give expensive gifts to God, we don't have to be golden-tongued, we don't have to be profound. What we do have to be is honest, straightforward, realistic, humble, open, accepting, loving, God-oriented. Praising God freely and truly holds all of these.

A famous statement in theology about glory is from the second century: "the glory of God is man fully alive..." Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon in what would become France, struggles to make God's glory meaningful to our everyday lives. Irenaeus sees a full human life as glorifying God. But we must go a bit further in his statement: "...moreover man's life is the vision of God..." We are not independent of our Creator. Human life is about fulfilling what God intends for us at our creation, our creation in the original big bang, our creation in the evolution of life, our creation in the union of sperm and egg in our parents' love, our creation as we respond throughout life to the prompting of God's Spirit. God's glory is the defining element in human life. "Seeing" God's glory gives purpose, direction, and meaning to our lives. Quoting First Corinthians (15.28), another church's catechism says this succinctly, "The ultimate purpose of creation is that God 'who is the creator of all things may at last be all in all, thus simultaneously assuring His own glory and our [blessedness] (beatitude)."

So, we see that all this talk of praise and glory in the Bible and in our saints does have something to tell us. It's about how we go about belonging to God, belonging to one another, and belonging to ourselves. Paul said it well: "...we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory."