

True Glory is 'Cruciform Glory'

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension by Mark Pilgrim

Acts 1.6-11 and John 17.1-11

Who are the heroes of our time? Who are the people we want to cover in glory? The prime candidate at the moment is surely Colonel Tom Moore...soon to be Sir Tom Moore. Did you see that he hopes the Queen will be careful with the sword when he is knighted? It would be a shame for there to be an accident and him need hospitalisation after he has raised so much money for the NHS!

A challenging note, questioning the adulation being accorded NHS staff and key workers, was sounded, however, in an article I read last week written by a doctor. The doctor was basically expressing concern that the 8 o'clock Clap for Carers is in danger of diverting the nation's attention away from a vital difficulty: namely that, by turning the NHS into something of an idol and by heaping praise on efforts to charity fund raise for our health care, there is a danger the country's population is beginning to see the NHS as more like a pet to be loved and cosseted...not a national service that government should maintain well without question. Behind the universal public acclaim for health and key workers, this key worker wanted to say 'we are just doing our jobs...and it would be so much better if our system had been better managed and funded in years gone by than it has been or is now. Forget the glory: attend to and change the politics. Our health service shouldn't be in such a state that its staff are seen as heroes for working without proper protection. Neither should our health service be in such a state that a 100 year old man successfully raises millions of pounds, partly because people know the health service needs it'. Interestingly, I saw on the BBC on Friday evening that the woman who started the Clap for Carers nine weeks ago is saying the same thing. She is suggesting that this Thursday's 10th Clap be the last for the moment – and that we should switch attention from clapping for carers to concentrate on the cause of their difficulties.

Recognising people's contributions and providing appropriate appreciation and acclaim can be fraught with difficulties. We see something of the same going on in our first reading. In the Acts of the Apostles, the last thing Jesus' family and friends want, I imagine, is for him to disappear. He has been so successful in attracting crowds. He has been so successful in persuading his close followers to give up their securities and follow him. He has been so successful in fulfilling his promise to return to them again after the horror of his crucifixion. Now he is leaving again! How are they to continue his work and implement his teaching without him there to guide them? Well: Luke gives a pretty clear answer. He places two angels next to Jesus' family and friends as he disappears – and the angels say, in 2020 Covid speak 'Don't just stand there clapping – return to your lives. Get on with unveiling God's kingdom wherever you are...and speed up Christ's return as you do so!'

According to the timescale of the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' disciples spend the next ten days hunkered down in a fearful holy huddle in Jerusalem – and then the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, descends upon them with power and strengthens them to begin to do and to implement all that Jesus had taught and trained them to do. These first followers put the equivalent of the '8pm Clap for Carers' behind them and get stuck in to the major task of making the world a better place – by proclaiming the Good News, fraught with challenge and danger, of their own accord. Is there something here, I wonder, that asks questions of us?

What more can we do – so that we aren't applauding on the side-lines or gawping into the sky – but actually fulfilling God's call to bring in God's kingdom?

Our own St Peter's Weekly Leaflet contains these suggestions:

Obtain some tins of fruit and veg and drop them off at Sandy Hollinghurst's house or ask her to come and collect them: participating in the Sisters of the Church's Loaves and Fishes initiative at this particular stage of Lockdown is an important and valuable thing to do.

Get the Thy Kingdom Come Prayer Walk details from the website or printed booklets and pray for different people and groups across our community as you take this exercise. You don't need to walk and pray just once – you could perhaps do it multiple times and make this part of your discipleship over the weeks and months to come. Or you can

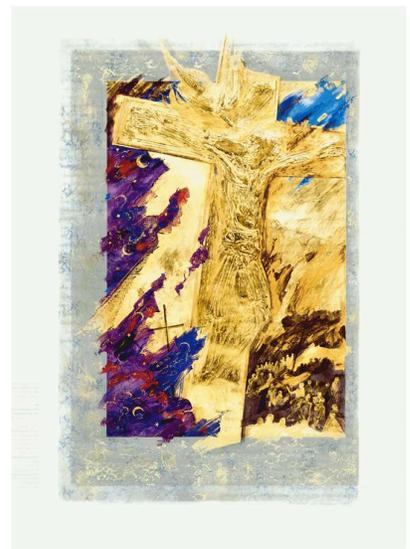
arrange for a prayer for God's world and God's people to be added to the rainbow display of prayers being created on St Peter's railings by its South Door.

Thirdly, there's the new opportunity to discuss with members of the public the big question asked by John Lennox's small book 'Where is God in a Coronavirus world?' 200 books have been taken: 100 more will be available from tomorrow. What can you do to participate and encourage others to take part in this existential discussion? I, for one, am going to re-read the book over the next couple of weeks and note carefully its major points, so that I can respond to sharp questions when they come!

The lesson I take from my own experience of challenge and getting stuck in to living out Christ's teaching over the last seven days is that none of this can happen, or is worth doing, without what we see Jesus doing in John chapter 17: praying.

Your prayers for me last week contributed to the smoothness and calm with which I was able to open up profound spiritual questions with members of my family. And Jesus' prayer in today's Gospel is full of nuggets for us to appreciate and learn from.

First of all, we need to appreciate that Jesus has already promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. Now the Fourth Evangelist invites us to hear Jesus' final words before he undergoes the trial and suffering he knows is imminently ahead. And what are those words? To whom are they directed? Unlike other Farewell discourses that other great leaders of the time produced, this one is not addressed to or directed at his followers. It is addressed to and directed at the one who gives us all life and the one to whom Jesus himself belongs – God. And the whole of this chapter, in fact the whole of the Gospel of John, is shot through with the teaching that the picture to the right seeks to portray. 'Crucifixion 2019' is part of a remarkable new Illuminated Bible, the St John's Bible, curated by a Benedictine monastery in the United States of America. Throughout this edition gold leaf is used as a representation of Christ revealing His divinity – and this painting is no exception. Gold leaf has been 'painted' on to the canvas, superimposed on a rich background of blue, purple and dark paint. But this radiant burst of gold light carries a poignant image. Into the gold leaf has been etched – or, perhaps better, even – fairly faintly scratched the figure of the crucified Christ. The balance, I suggest, between the pain of the cross and the glory of the resurrection is amazingly well portrayed. Which is more significant – the Cross or the Resurrection? The painting invites us to express John's answer: neither! You can't have resurrection without crucifixion and crucifixion will inevitably lead, in God's economy, to resurrection. So: true glory, says John's Gospel and this picture...true glory is always Cruciform Glory. True glory is always 'cross-shaped'.



So, as we go about our lives this week, as we wonder what to do and what to pray for as we seek to be faithful to God's call to us and on us today, I invite you to share in saying with me a contemporary version of a traditional prayer known as the Anima Christi – 'Soul of Christ.' The prayer takes the physicality and the cross of Jesus to be as important and life-giving as his spirituality and ascension. So I invite you to bring this reflection to an end by praying with me:

**Jesus, may all that is in you flow into me.
May your body and blood be my food and drink.
May your passion and death be my strength and life.
Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.
May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.
Let me not run from the love which you offer.
But hold me safe from the forces of evil.
On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.
Keep calling to me until that day comes,
When, with our saints, I may praise you forever.
Amen**