

### ***Becoming a Star***

In the name of him who is coming to judge the living and the dead, dear friends in Christ: The dream of everyone entering a career in acting is to become a star: to be widely known and admired for their work, to be worshipped by their adoring fans, to command the highest pay for film projects, to have their name listed first and most prominently in the credits, to live a life of luxury, to be constantly hobnobbing with others who like them are rich and famous, and perhaps mostly, by doing all of this to achieve a certain kind of immortality – to be remembered and celebrated for their achievements long, long after they are gone.

All of which reminds me of the poem by Shelly entitled *Ozymandias*. It goes like this:

I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The poem reveals the truth about the fleeting nature of earthly glory. This Ozymandias, whoever he was, had erected to himself a gigantic statue, presumably in the center of his sprawling capital city. He imagined that for ages to come, kings and conquerors would compare their accomplishments to his and be convinced of their own wretched inferiority. They would read his proud boast and despair of themselves and what they had achieved in comparison to him. The irony is that his words inscribed on the pedestal hold true; but not in the way that he intended. The empire that Ozymandias had built and of which he was so proud had, like his statue, collapsed into ruin and crumpled into dust. It was long forgotten, swallowed up by the desert sands. The inscription "Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!" turns out to be a warning for proud people of the future. It says "All that I accomplished is lost and gone; and one day, yours will be too."

The same holds true for the acting stars of today – and too the stars of every other human endeavor: industry, science, politics, engineering; one day they and their work will be forgotten. The funny thing about the stars of acting, though, is that their work involves pretending to people that they aren't and who accomplished things that they didn't. In other words, their real claim to fame if they achieve it and become a star is that they're really good at faking it.

Anyway, the reason I mention all of this is that we who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are to aspire to become stars of a different sort. This is a stardom that truly lasts and that cannot be

forgotten. It's genuine immortality: life that never ends. We hear about it in today's reading from the prophet Daniel.

We hear first of a coming time of great turmoil and distress for the people of God. Jesus describes it in more detail in today's Gospel. It's specifically on account of their faith in Christ that they are targeted for persecution. And certainly we've seen this throughout the age of the Church, from the Apostles who with one exception died martyrs' deaths, through the first two centuries of Roman persecution, right down to the present day in many places throughout the world where confessing Christ is considered a crime worthy of imprisonment or death. Even in our supposedly enlightened and free western world, it's becoming increasingly uncomfortable to bear the name of the Savior in public and to act according to Christian conscience. We anticipate that it will only grow worse.

But we are not to fear. At that time – by which I mean *this* time – we are under the protection of the Lord God Almighty who sets among us the archangel Michael, the great prince who has charge of God's people. He is our defender against the forces of evil. Interestingly enough, in Christian art he is usually depicted bearing a fiery double-edged sword, which in a way is true. But we must understand that spiritual wars are fought with spiritual weapons; and the Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. That's what works saving faith in the heart of believers: the truth of God's Word. The weapons of the enemy are lies that lead people astray and threats of violence that incite fear. These can be easily countered. God's truth trumps the lies of the enemy every time – which necessarily means that we must know his truth and train with it constantly. And a Christian has no fear of death. We are on the side of him who defeated death for us. Jesus said, "Who believes in me lives, even though he dies; yes, who lives and believes in me never dies." That word is true. Yes, for a time the body sleeps in the dust of the earth; but the spirit departs to be with the Lord. And in this way the faithful are delivered from all evil even if in this world they die.

That is not the end of the story, however. Daniel goes on to describe the day when our bodies that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake. It will happen at Christ's second coming. He will bring with him the spirits of those who departed in faith. They will be reunited with their bodies raised up new and incorruptible, no longer subject to age or illness. Those faithful who are yet alive on that day will be changed. They will put on their imperishable flesh without having to taste death. These together will enjoy everlasting life in the new creation.

So also will rise or be changed the unbelievers, but their future is not so bright. They rise to shame and everlasting contempt, and will be sent away to the place prepared for Satan and his evil angels – where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

And then we get to the part about becoming stars. "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the heavens." Who are the wise? What wisdom do they possess? The wise are those who trust in Jesus who is himself the wisdom of God. They are wise because they know that in and of themselves they are nothing. They have no works worthy of God's recognition. They have only their sin and shame. And yet they shine with a righteousness that is not their own. It is imputed to them through faith in the One who is righteous and who gave his life on the cross to bear the penalty of their sin. And thus will be fulfilled the Word of the Lord to Abraham who was told to look up into the night sky and count the stars if he could. The Lord told him, "So shall your offspring be!" Yes, like the stars, forever and ever.

And just as stars vary in brightness, so it will be in the resurrection of the righteous. Some will shine brighter than others. This will be according to God's judgment; not according to

human standards. Last week we heard about the widow with her two small coins who was given high praise by Jesus not because of the amount she gave, which was really quite little; but because of her faith, love, and commitment in giving it. My point being that it's not necessarily the things that seem great in our eyes that the Lord will reward, but rather simple acts of humble service performed through faith in Christ Jesus – not in hope of reward, but rather motivated by the love of Christ. “I’m doing this for you because you need it.” The hungry fed, the naked clothed, the stranger welcomed, the sick and in prison visited, the person prayed for, and what is the greatest need of all: the unbeliever with whom you share the Gospel.

That’s what Daniel says: “Those who turn many to righteousness [they] will shine like the stars forever and ever. What greater service can you perform for someone than to help deliver them from death and hell through faith in Christ Jesus? And look, I’m not talking about knocking on strangers’ doors and handing out tracts, which isn’t very effective anyway. No, I’m talking about parents teaching their children and raising them in the faith. I’m talking about supporting missions and Christian education. I’m talking about what is the easiest and most effective method of evangelism there is: the truth is that most people outside of the Christian faith come into to it simply because someone close – usually a friend or relative – invited them to come to church with them.

My friends, you will shine like stars. My prayer is that you will shine brightly to the glory of God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***