

Text: John 12:12-43

 Palm Sunday

A Theology of Glory

In the name of the Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin with some questions for you to consider. What is *glory*? How would you define it? What does glory look like? And how would you know if you or someone else achieved it? Glory ... what is it?

If you lived in the ancient Roman world, the answers to those questions were easy. The thing that generals and statesmen dreamed of when they thought of achieving glory was being awarded what was called a triumph. Suppose a legion commander in some far flung corner of the empire won a series of stunning victories on the battlefield, fighting against impossible odds and yet crushing their enemies, thereby either gaining more territory for Rome or establishing peace in a long troubled region. Word of this would get back to the Roman Senate. That noble assembly would then discuss the relative merits of what the commander accomplished, and if his deeds were determined to be worthy, they would award him a triumph, which was a spectacular parade through the city of Rome. All the citizens would turn out, lining the streets and shouting cheers to the conquering hero riding proudly in his war chariot. The parade would wind through the city amid much fanfare, eventually arriving at the steps of the Senate where the one being honored would have a crown of laurel leaves placed upon his head. That was the pinnacle of glory. It was honor and public acclamation. And there were levels of triumph. If they *really* wanted to honor someone, the Emperor himself would place the crown on the head of the hero. And if they wanted to say the guy was a superstar, the crown of laurel leaves would be fashioned of gold. That would be the ultimate triumph that said you've achieved glory.

This is what's happening to Jesus on Palm Sunday. He is receiving the Jerusalem equivalent of a Roman triumph. Now it's true that it doesn't have official sanction. The Jewish ruling council would never have approved it – they are, for the most part, enemies of Jesus. But that makes this triumph even better. This is a grassroots thing. It comes from the bottom up. Jesus is *genuinely* popular with the crowd. It isn't a few leaders telling everyone "We've got to honor this guy"; it's the people themselves recognizing that Jesus is worthy of honor and "Who cares what our leaders think?"

Now Jesus was already well known to the people of Jerusalem. The reports of his mighty works and teaching ministry in Galilee were the talk of the town. And Jesus had taught and performed miracles in the city as well. But a couple of months prior to Palm Sunday, the growing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders came to a head. They wanted to arrest and kill Jesus right away. Rather than force a show down prematurely, Jesus withdrew from the city and spent the winter months maintaining a fairly low profile. Then in the spring, the big question on everyone's mind was whether Jesus would show up again for the Passover. Well, he did; and he did it in a big way. Just a couple days before the launch of the Passover festivities, Jesus suddenly appeared in Bethany, a little suburb just two miles outside of Jerusalem. There he raised Lazarus from the dead, a man who had been sealed in his tomb for four days. There were a lot of Jerusalem folks who witnessed this stunning miracle, and word of it spread throughout the city. This is what brings the crowds out to acclaim Jesus on Palm Sunday as he enters the city: his amazing victory over death. This is what's got them convinced that he is truly the Messiah, the long expected King, great David's greater son. And this is why they heap all the worldly glory, laud, and honor they can muster upon him.

It drives the Pharisees nuts. They hate seeing their archrival receiving so much attention. It makes them green with envy. They love to have themselves recognized for their supposedly super-holy lives and their meticulous striving to keep the commandments of God. They despise Jesus for criticizing the way they think and do things. He calls them hypocrites and white washed tombs: appearing good on the outside but full of the stinking decay of sin within. And now to see the crowd taking Jesus' side and praising him for his mighty works – it makes their blood boil. They complain bitterly “The whole world has gone after him.”

And so it would seem, for now a group of Greeks has come. They also want to see Jesus. It means that the fame of Jesus has extended far beyond the borders of Galilee and Judea. Jesus is getting much wider attention. His popularity has attained the ancient world's version of going viral. These Greeks, because they're Gentiles, can't go in the Temple to the court of Jewish men where Jesus does most of his teaching. That's why they ask Philip for a private audience with Jesus. He's got to come out to them. And so you have to picture the scene: Jesus is teaching in the Temple, probably in the place called Solomon's porch. He's got a large crowd of eager listeners, peppered here and there with the Pharisees' spies. They're listening intently for anything he might say that they can use against him. On the fringes of the crowd are other Pharisees, not trying to hide themselves and openly seething with animosity that Jesus is getting all this glory. Up step Philip and Andrew to inform Jesus that there's a bunch of Greeks outside who also want to see him. To the Pharisees, this is injury added to the insult. They were speaking figuratively when they said the whole world was going after him. Now they see that it's true. Jesus' glory is becoming global.

Now, one might think that Jesus would get up immediately and go meet with these foreigners; after all, he's the Lord of the whole world. He's come to save all people and include them in his kingdom. And anyone who knows anything about publicity knows that you have to do what you can to promote yourself. If you've got an eager new audience and a chance to reach wider venues, you do what you can to develop it.

But not Jesus. He stays put. He ignores these Greeks who are hoping to see him. And he answers instead with these curious words: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” What? Isn't Jesus being glorified as he speaks, what with all the honor, fame, and attention he's getting? Answer: no, not really. What Jesus is receiving is the glory of this world. *And he couldn't care less about it.* Satan offered him all the glory of the world during his temptation, and Jesus turned him down cold. What is the glory of the world anyway, but a few moments of fleeting fame? The shouts of a crowd, the praises of sinful men; a couple of minutes in the limelight, a short span of recognition, a brief period of popularity that soon fades away like the flowers of the field or that becomes dried up and crumbles into dust like a crown of laurel leaves ... that's all the glory the world can give. And it's awfully fickle. In just six days many of the voices who hailed Jesus as the Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord will be calling for his crucifixion. No, Jesus has no use for the glory that comes from this world.

He's here to seek the glory of his Father in heaven. He's here to reveal the glory of God in himself, not by earning the praises of men who look up to him; but rather by serving mankind from the lowest and most horrifying of all places: the front side of a bloody cross. Mark this well: God's glory is revealed not in the praises and worship that we can offer him; but rather in the self-sacrificing love that he has for us. God our Father reveals his glory in the person of Jesus in shame and disgrace and insult and suffering on behalf of sinful man. It's in the cross that God is glorified. It's there, on the cross, we see God's all-surpassing love revealed. It's in Jesus giving his life a ransom for many. It's in the Son of Man giving his body to die and to be buried like a grain of wheat so that it might bear fruit and multiply and give life to all who believe

in him. The Glory of God is not in being honored and served; but in giving himself to serve and honor others – to save us from our sins. True glory is not in a crown of laurel leaves. It's in crown of thorns.

And this, my friends, is where so much of the modern church goes astray. We imagine that we come here on Sundays to honor God with our worship and praises. We think that we are doing this for his glory. Some churches routinely have what they call praise services, in which it's *all* about us giving glory to God. And they make big productions of it: highly accomplished musicians and special praise bands and light shows and videos; celebrity preachers on the big screen teaching about how you too can bring glory to God by your holy life, and worship leaders encouraging you to give God glory by waving your arms back and forth in time to the music. "Oh boy, we're worshipping now! Can't you see and feel the glory of the Lord?"

Most emphatically, no! And unfortunately, because we are worldly rather than spiritual people, we don't understand. We can't see. Like the Pharisees, we are blind to the truth that we have no glory to give. They imagined that they could glorify God with their holy lives and their obedience to God's law, with their lengthy prayers and worship practices. But what they were really doing was attempting to glorify themselves and earn the honor and praise of men. They sought the glory of the world; and sadly, all too often, so do we.

We need to change our way of thinking. We need to change our way of seeing things. Our text tells us that the prophet Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord and spoke of him. The reference is not to the vision that Isaiah had of the Lord seated in his temple high and exalted; but rather to the servant song: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" You're familiar with the passage. It's Isaiah chapter 53, which continues:

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
 a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
 he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows;
 yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 and with his stripes we are healed.

It was in this, the suffering of Jesus to serve sinful mankind, that Isaiah looked ahead and saw the Lord's glory revealed. And it's looking back on the same events – the Lord's passion and death – that we too are to see the glory of God. And not just see the glory of the cross; but also to participate in the Father's glorification of the Son not by our praises and imagined good works, which amount to nothing, but in our reception of and trust in the salvation that Jesus served, suffered, and died to give us. That's how we glorify the Lord Jesus: by humbly repenting of our sins and eagerly receiving the forgiveness, life, and salvation he freely offers.

Now, maybe you're wondering if I'm saying it's wrong for us to give glory, laud, and honor to Jesus through our praises and thanksgiving. The answer is no, not at all. It's entirely appropriate for us to do these things – especially in view of what he's done for us. But that's the point: his glory is not in our praises, but rather in our receiving his gifts of love and mercy that flow from the cross. That's what the Lord wants to see. That's what he delights in: his children taking and living in the salvation he gives through Jesus Christ his Son. That is his glory. It's right that we praise God for what he's done and continues to do through the ministry of his church; but that's not what glorifies him.

What glorifies the Lord is the cross. What glorifies the Lord is when he opens our eyes to see the glory of the cross. What glorifies the Lord is when by his Word and Spirit he transforms us to be like Jesus, seeking not the fame, fortune, and glory of this world for ourselves, but rather giving ourselves in humble and loving service for each other. That's a true theology of glory.

Therefore let us, on this Palm Sunday and every day that follows, honor the Lord not so much with the glory of this world; but with humility, with repentance, and with open hearts and minds that receive his gifts of grace in Christ Jesus. In his holy and blessed name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!