

The Glory of the Lord

In the name of the Word made flesh, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Epistle the Apostle Paul gives praise to God because (I'm quoting now) "he chose us in [Jesus] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will".

That's a stunning statement that deserves some unpacking. God chose us in Christ Jesus before he created anything. Specifically, he predestined us to be adopted through him. That means before the Lord God lifted his voice to call creation into existence, he had already chosen you to be adopted as one of his children through Holy Baptism – which means that he knew you would need to be adopted. You see, if there had been no sin, no fall of mankind from our initial state of innocence, you wouldn't need to be adopted because you would have been God's child by birth, just like Adam was. The point is that God planned to redeem you, that is, to buy you back from sin, death, and the power of the devil through the bloody sacrifice on the cross of Jesus Christ, his Son, before you or anything else in the universe even existed.

Of course, if you've ever given some thought about what it means to say with Scripture that God is omniscient, that is, all-knowing, you may be thinking, "Well duh. If God knows everything, he had to know the fall into sin was going to happen. He also had to know what he was going to do to fix the problem. So what's the big deal?" It's this: the question is "why?" Why would God create mankind knowing full well what it was going to cost him? When you contemplate the terrible price he would have to pay – and I don't think we can even begin appreciate how terribly high a price it really was – why would the Lord even start such a plan? What sort of motivation could lie behind God's pleasure and will that he would voluntarily enter into such a plan to begin with? Why would God even think up and go ahead with plan that he knew from the very start was going to cause him to have his only-begotten Son tortured to death by crucifixion?

Those are questions that Christian theologians and laypeople have struggled with for twenty centuries. Some, I'm sure, are not interested in the answer. They're all too willing to shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, who knows why God does anything he does?" They're happy to consign the question to the shelf of inscrutable mysteries that we'll just have to ask the Lord about one day when we're with him in the age to come. Quite frankly, such an attitude smacks more of spiritual apathy and willful ignorance than genuine Christian humility. So, I hope it doesn't disappoint anyone when I say we're going to move past it to something a little more substantial.

Besides, the Lord gives us the answer to the questions in his Holy Word, so we would be negligent not to pursue it. That being said, it turns out that not everyone who has sought to unravel the mystery of "why?" in God's Holy word has come up with the same answer. By far the most popular one is simply this: God intends to glorify himself. His magnificent creation, his mighty acts of redemption, the splendor of the age to come – all these are designed by him to reflect glory upon himself. We, his people, are to see and appreciate these great things he has done and give him glory. As one commentator that I read put it, "God's ultimate goal is to elicit the praise of his creatures." Or, to say it another way, God's purpose in creating and redeeming us is so that he'd have subjects to rule over who would keep telling him what a great guy he is.

Having answered the question that way, it follows that the best thing we can do with our time is praise God, since that's what he created us for. Our highest and noblest calling is fulfilled when we gather in his name and sing his praise. To be sure, praising God is our principle duty and sole reason for existing. And that's why we come here on Sundays, to fulfill this obligation so that God can be glorified and the purpose of all creation can be fulfilled. It's a simple and straightforward answer to the question of "why?"—and though popular, it's just as wrong as it can be.

Those of you who have children either by birth or adoption, let me ask you, why did you want them? Was it your hope to glorify yourself? Now, because of our fallen state, none of us has pure motives for anything, and there's always a tendency to want to find some vicarious sense of accomplishment from the achievements of our children – but I think most of us would agree that the primary purpose for desiring children is to enrich our lives and theirs with love by bringing someone new into the family to love. So, if you will allow me to borrow an expression from Jesus, if we, being evil, desire children for better motives than self-exaltation, why would we want to attribute such a base motive to God? If you follow the line of logic through to its end, it comes down to this: you and I have something God wants, be it our praise or our conformity to his will or whatever, and he won't be happy until he gets it. His ultimate goal is to get something from you and me.

But Paul writes this: "In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ". And that puts a different perspective on it. God's motive is not self-glorification, but love. God loves perfectly. And perfect love never has the motive of getting anything except what is good for the one who is the object of its love. Perfect love sacrifices completely without any hope of getting something in return. It's not that you and I have something God wants, but rather than you and I are what God wants – that he wants to be his children so that we can live forever in his love.

Does that mean we should not praise God? Heavens no. Praise and worship are the ways God has given us to express our appreciation for his loving kindness, because as his children, we will want to do that. But the thing to see is that even praise and worship are a gift God has given us to fulfill our need to tell him how much we appreciate his love. They are not his goal; they are the necessary response we have in receiving his love.

Well, does this mean God does not want us to conform to his will? Again, no. But why does he want us to conform? Is it because he has this deep seated need to be an dictator and control our lives? Does it bring him glory when we submit to his will? Is he on some kind of power trip? Let me ask you parents, you enforce your will on your children, don't you? Why do you do that? Is it to get something from them? Is it their obedience itself that you're after? Or is it that by getting them to conform to your rules and instructions you know they will be safe and happier in the end, and because you love them enough to desire their safety and happiness? Are the rules you enforce for your glory or for their good? God knows better than any of us what perfect happiness is all about, and because he loves us, he give us his rules so that we can be safe and happy.

In fact, God loves us so much that he wants us to be "holy and blameless" before him. That's why he made us and redeemed us by the blood of his Son. Isaiah writes, "The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory ... You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God." Listen to what he says: *your* righteousness, *your* glory, *you* shall be a crown of beauty. I ask you, is God's goal to glorify himself or you? God is glorious all by himself, thank you very much; and he doesn't need

anything you or I have to offer to make him more glorious. No, it is we who lack righteousness, glory, and beauty – and these are the rich inheritance that God is even now wanting to give us.

First he wants to give you righteousness. He does that by communicating the righteousness of Jesus his Son to you. That's why we have Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. By these means he assures you that your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, and, to quote Isaiah again, he has clothed you with the garments of salvation; he has covered [you] with the robe of righteousness"; that is, he puts Christ's righteousness on you. In this way you stand before him "holy and blameless".

Next he wants to make you glorious. What exactly does that mean? We normally associate glory with bright light and illumination. Does God want you to glow in the dark? Well, not exactly; but in a way he does. Referring to Jesus the Apostle John writes in his first epistle, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth." Now, it's true that on one occasion Jesus did shine with brightness on the Mount of Transfiguration; but that's not what John means here. Jesus said that he was always the Light of the World, but he didn't walk around glowing like a lantern. What he did do was continuously show forth the love of God in his words and actions. At no time did he show God's love more clearly than when he was crucified for our sins. When all the world was dark, God's love stood like a blazing torch on Calvary. It didn't make a very bright light; no, it would have made you turn away with disgust and horror to see it. But the light of God's love shown in the darkness, and the darkness did not understand it. But it was here that the glory of God was revealed in its brightest splendor.

Now, made righteous by that glorious light, God wants us to be glorious by reflecting it. This will be our glory: to shine God's love in the darkness by giving ourselves in love and selfless service to one another like he gave himself for us. It isn't very attractive, this sort of glory. It's a glory that shines while serving in humility. It shines when forgive those who offend or hurt us. It shines in wearisome, mundane, and often thankless work. The more brightly it shines, the more the dark world won't understand it. But it is exactly how God revealed his glory to us.

This, it needs to be said, will be the highest form of praise we can offer God. If you have children, students, or anyone who looks up to you, you know that what they say about you is one thing; but you really know that you've made an impact when you see them imitate your behavior. The same is true in the family of God. You are the "crown of beauty in his hand" when you do what he does. And take note that Isaiah says he holds this crown in his hand. He doesn't put it on his head so that he can look in a mirror and see how glorious it looks on him, but he holds it in his hand so he admire it for its own beauty.

The Lord wants us to be that crown of beauty by doing what he does, and to help us better understand what he does he has given us his Word. It's a record of his loving acts of creation and redemption throughout history, so that meditating upon the accounts of his actions we may come to know him better, as St. Paul says in the passage immediately following today's epistle reading, "*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*". By his Spirit of wisdom and revelation he opens the Scripture to us so that we will know him not as an angry God who wants to manipulate us for his pleasure or gather praise for himself at our expense; but rather as the loving Father who desires only the very best for his

children – and to prove it, he gave his very best for us: his only-begotten Son. God’s purpose in all things is to show us his love so that we will know him as our loving Father.

Now that the Christmas season is ending, we are moving into Epiphany. The word Epiphany means “to shine forth” or to “show forth”. The idea is that the Word made flesh in Bethlehem didn’t stay hidden in a small Judean village, but went out to reveal the glory of the Lord to the world by his acts of love and selfless service to us. So may we, this coming Epiphany, by making use of God’s gifts to us reveal the glory of the Lord in our actions and so be the crown of beauty in his hand. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!