

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR

EPIPHANY 3 2018

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

We live in an age when people are increasingly unfamiliar with the Bible. Most will not know that these words come from the 40th Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Nevertheless, they might yet have a familiar ring to them.

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The familiar ring of course will be the result of their having come across those words in one of the choruses from Handel's 'Messiah'. In a culture in which the Church is being rather side-lined, it is inspiring to reflect upon the fact that something of our rootedness in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and something of our profound (if hidden and unacknowledged) spiritual 'longing', is both preserved and expressed in some of the music and poetry and painting and other artistic endeavour that remains popular in our time. Handel's 'Messiah' goes on being sung, and drawing the crowds.

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The words express the prophet's conviction that there would come a time when God would be known and acknowledged by all people; a time when God's authority would be bowed to, and God's nature understood. This is what is meant by the revelation of God's 'glory'.

The word 'glory' needs a little understanding. Originally, in our Biblical tradition, it meant 'weight' and, later, the true 'value' of something. Gradually, it came to mean the real 'nature' of a thing or a person. So, if the **glory of the Lord** is one day to be revealed, we might look forward to the day when we shall simply 'know' God. It was something of that hope that the prophet Isaiah harboured in his heart.

Moving onwards through some centuries, we come to the time of St John; the John who wrote the Gospel from which our second lesson came today. His Gospel begins with a Prologue – a Prologue with which a number of us here this morning will be familiar. Our acquaintance with it will be rooted in the fact that it is read each and every Christmas at one service or another. It is the reading that starts: **In the beginning was the Word**. Those of you who know it will remember that it tells of the coming into this world of one, Jesus Christ, who was the embodiment of God's self-expression (God's 'Word') and in whom therefore the earliest witnesses **beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth**.

It was St John's profound belief that the character of God had been shown to us in and through the life of Jesus Christ.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. In Jesus Christ, so St John must have believed, this 'prophecy' had been fulfilled.

But John has a surprise for the readers of his Gospel. There is no time to go into detail this morning but, if you read him carefully, you will see that, for him, the true moment of 'glorification' (the moment when Jesus Christ fully reveals the nature and character of God) is the hour of crucifixion. As the twentieth century Churchman and theologian W. H. Vanstone was to write in words that were to become those of a well-known hymn:

Here is God; no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God whose arms of love
aching, spent the world sustain.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. Isaiah would not have foreseen that **the mouth of the Lord** should have **spoken it** through the 'Word made flesh', and in such an unexpected way.

Here is God, no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God whose arms of love
aching, spent the world sustain.

If this, however, is the 'crux' of John's message, the final explication of his understanding of God's glory, it takes him a while to arrive at it. He follows Jesus on his journeying until the Lord arrives at Golgotha. And, as he follows him along the way, John describes seven incidents that he calls 'signs'; signs that, in one way or another, point towards and anticipate that final 'revelation' and 'disclosure' on the cross of God's glory. The first of the 'signs' is the one we were told about in our second reading: the account of the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

The story is well-known. The stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification, now seemingly empty, represent the aridity of the old religious order that Jesus came to remedy. The water that he calls upon the servants to pour into those vessels must remind us of that for which we and all human beings always thirst; the water of life; some kind of spiritual satisfaction. But what are we to make of its being transformed into wine?

Only after we have read the Gospel to its end, and understood its inner message, are we able even to begin to answer that question. But perhaps we come to see that 'water into wine' points to the change that only Jesus seems to be able to effect: the change in us that compels us to believe that the satisfaction of our spiritual thirst is only to be found in the drinking of such wine as represents to us his blood; the sign of God's giving of His all for us; His eternal longing for, and His love for us; that expression of His glory, seen upon the cross.

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory."

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The Right Reverend David Conner, Dean of Windsor