**SIGNS OF GLORY**

Last Monday was what’s known as ‘Blue Monday’, by general agreement the most depressing day of the year. Add to that this last, lost year and the huge death toll of Covid, the end of four years of a presidency that’s reduced the United States to toxic anger, then throw in the looming threat of climate change – and you’ve got sufficient material for a year of blue Mondays.

So why do I want to talk about glory? Where’s the glory in all the mess around us? Life, politics, the economy, they all seem to be in rags and tatters, an arena of broken glass. There’s so much to darken the soul.

So why glory? Well, because of that wedding at Cana, and that lovely verse, ’Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, *and revealed his glory*, and his disciples believed in him.’ I think there’s a really important clue in there about a different way of seeing the world.

In his gospel John is very keen on glory. Right at the start he says ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, *and we have seen his glory*, *glory* as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.’ For John that glory is finally displayed for everyone to see on the cross, where love was tested to destruction – and came out alive. The cross is the place of glory. As Jesus said, ‘When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.’

But how does that help? Well, only if you can see that the deepest truth about our existence is found in glory and beauty rather than ugliness and sin. And that’s what the wedding at Cana begins to show us. The wedding guests see scarcity (the wine has run out); Jesus sees abundance (180 gallons of wonderful wine). The steward see catastrophe; the servants see miracle. The bride’s parents see shame; the disciples see glory.

Which way up do we see life? That’s the question. I want to suggest that in Christ we are surrounded by far more glory that we ever imagine. I’m reading a wonderful biography of CS Lewis at the moment and I’ve been reminded of that great quote of his, ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen; not only because I see it but because, by it, I see everything else.’ *By our faith* we see glory all around. *By our faith* we see the glory lying just under the surface of everything and everyone. Faith isn’t something you just look at; it’s the lens through which we see the deep reality of everything else. Christianity isn’t a *spectacle* we look at; it’s a *pair of spectacles* we look through, and through which everything comes into focus.

I was once talking with a group of women living in high-rise flats in Gateshead and the subject was spirituality in an urban setting. One woman next to me said, ‘It’s amazing to see how a single blade of grass can bugger up six inches of concrete.’ She saw glory where others would only see desolation.

The American poet Walt Whitman wrote a poem called Miracles. It starts like this: ‘Why, who makes much of a miracle! As [for] me I know nothing but miracles, whether I walk the streets of Manhattan or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky, or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water, or stand under trees in the woods, or talk by day with anyone I love, or sleep in the bed at night with anyone I love….’ And so it goes on.

‘I know nothing but miracles,’ he says. Maybe we could too.

I think the secret is this. When we look out at the dirt and dust of life, the scars and folly of it all, try flipping it over and seeing instead an arena of glorious, struggling humanity aiming for higher things. When you see a world apparently devoid of beauty, flip it over and see the deep down symmetry of things. When you see an angry crowd, see hurt children needing love. When you think God must be utterly absent, see a God who’s actually utterly present, always working for good, always stretching for better; always standing alongside us in the rubble, and always, but always, on our side.

Our big mistake is to think of God as absent. The thing is: God is so *completely present* we look right past him. Those guests at Cana didn’t recognise who Jesus was; they couldn’t see for looking. But the disciples saw. They saw his glory and believed in him. We so often see the world as without God; try flipping it over and seeing a world full of God, aching with potential, alive with divine life. It’s an act of faith, a way of seeing the world overflowing with God, just an inch away from being full of grace and truth.

It’s like those Magic Eye pictures where at first you see a rabbit, but then it flips over and suddenly you see a man fishing. And you think, ‘why didn’t I see that before?’ Why didn’t I see that God is present in everything, celebrating or weeping, beautiful or hurt, but always working flat out for our well-being.

Now, I realise many of you might be thinking, ‘Poor old Bishop John, he’s finally lost it. This is hopelessly sentimental. The world is a tough, brutal place. It’s a sinking ship. You just have to look reality in the face and do your best, not peddle dreams and wishful thinking.’

I hear it! A part of me thinks the same. But that’s the glorious scandal of faith. That’s why faith is such an adventure. It’s what the crazy promises of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes were all about. Come and live in an upside-down world, says Jesus, and you’ll find it’s the right way up. Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, give away your last coat, happy are those who mourn, and the poor, and the meek; don’t worry about anything, it’s all OK. Of course this is crazy stuff – or it’s the only way the world will stay sane and survive. It’s glory - or nothing.

One morning a violinist went busking in a New York subway. While he was playing about 2000 people went past him. He played some very demanding music on what looked like an old, well-loved instrument. Some people put money in the violin case on the ground in front of him, but hardly anyone even checked their stride, let alone stopped to listen. Most people hurried past, eyes averted. At the end of the three quarters of an hour the violinist had collected thirty-two dollars.

That evening the same violinist played at the best concert hall in the city. The tickets were extremely expensive. He used the same instrument as in the morning, valued at about three and a half million dollars. He played the same highly demanding music as he'd played in the subway. He was paid a fortune. His name was Joshua Bell and he’s one of the most accomplished violinists in the world.

In the morning the pedestrians had missed a masterclass, unable to recognise the genius of the violinist and the glory of the music. Might we not also be missing so much beauty and hope just under the surface of life, like jewels sparkling in the grass as we sleepwalk past God’s glory? Out of the chaos around us might we not be missing the shooting star?

What was happening at Cana? Jesus was saying that in his ministry, his life, death and resurrection, an even greater wedding was about to take place, the marriage of heaven and earth. On that day in Cana Jesus revealed his glory. The disciples believed. The celebrations began.

So guess what? Life’s a wedding, and we’re all invited.