

GLORY—sung and spoken—tonight we hear that word, again and again.

Glory is . . . well, what, exactly?

Hard to pin down a single, simple definition, isn't it?

Glory comes in so many shapes and sizes:

- A sunset, a rainbow, waves crashing on the beach
- Trumpets and drums, festal regalia and high ceremony
- A freshly opened flower; a newborn baby, fast asleep—glorious, all of these!

And we don't just encounter glory; we bestow it.

- Celebrity acclaim—the fleeting fascination we project on “stars” in entertainment, sports, or politics:
Lights! Camera! Access!
- Hero recognition—the high honor we render to individuals exceptional in bravery, service, or achievement:
Medal of Honor recipients, Nobel Prize winners

Whether we come upon it or confer it,

glory doesn't just invite our attention; it transfixes our attention.

But what, exactly, is it?

When you and I find or give glory—

are we really doing anything but gushing: *OH WOW; GOOD SHOW!*

Glory be to God on high.

Oh God, whose glory is always to have mercy.

The Lord is glorious in his saints.

When we elevate the word “glory” to the level of a cosmic claim and a faith commitment the question becomes more pressing still.

What, in God, or in God's saints, is our transfixed attention actually fixing on?

And, in the setting of this evening, how does divine glory touch that interplay of grief and gratitude

(sometimes clouded with feelings of guilt and frustration)

that overtakes us at the death of one we love;

and follows us on a long journey

toward the healing of anguish, brokenness, and loss?

We've spoken and sung of *glory* a lot this evening;

what does glory mean for Christians who celebrate, on two days, back to back,

The Feast of All Saints, and the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed?

The words we have just heard from the Book of Revelation speak to all these questions.

No, these words sing to these questions.

Indeed, well-spoken though the reading from Revelation was this evening;

the music of the anthem the choir has just sung

renders this text more richly than any reading ever can.

The Revelation to John is a song of shrill defiance, and a stirring song of hope.

It's finale, the portion we have heard tonight,

is an orchestration of sonorous majesty and tender comfort.

Theological musicology is no substitute for sacred music.

But hearing about the music we have listened to can help us engage the song more fully, and maybe even help us add our voices to the choir.

A song then, of defiance and of hope. Why so?

Those for whom the author composed this score

were suffering threat, harassment, violence, slaughter.

They would not capitulate to persecution

by an empire that demanded their ultimate allegiance.

Since that worship they reserved for God alone, the state declared them insurrectionists.

Strategically and systematically, figuratively and literally,

for the bold stand they had chosen to take; they were being dismembered.

Explanations and exhortations don't help at times like that.

From the seemingly omnipotent and omnipresent terror

of a cruel counterfeit divinity named the Emperor of Rome,

John, the composer, sings his listeners toward a deeper, truer vision of reality.

Listen again to some of the lyrics; what we hear is a song of glory:

- *No more sea.*

That ancient symbol of lives and relationships dashed and discarded—

of distances impossible to cross—Gone for good, once and for all!

In place of the sea, *the river of the water of life*,

flanked by trees with leaves for healing—

healing—what was that?—not just for the persecuted; but for the nations,

healing and reconnection for everyone—

even those doing the persecuting.

- *The home of God is among mortals; He will dwell with them, and be with them.*

Did we hear that right?

No more endless questing in search of the divine,

only to arrive at the gates of heaven and find them locked and barred.

No—God not just around, but there—there for God's people—really there.

- *No temple in the city.*

God, fully present everywhere, not just in designated, segregated holy spaces.

- *Death will be no more, nor mourning, crying, and pain.*

No agonizing separation from all those without whom we are really not ourselves.

No irreparably broken connections from friends and family—

those we deeply love, but see no more.

But also no more tragic disconnection from those with whom

we have been trapped in endless rounds of destructive competition.

- *No night there—no ships passing one another in the dark*

- *The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.*

There it is—there's glory for you;

Glory is no zero sum game, where the only way to know for sure if we've got glory

is to do everything we can to make quite sure that they get no glory whatsoever.

If the composer of this anthem is correct, then glory, whenever discovered

Does not diminish us or put us at a distance.

Rather, that which is glorious is that with which, in awe, we sense a deep connection—
the sunset, the crashing waves, the high festival, the flower, the newborn baby.

If song writer John has got it right, then glory, when rightly bestowed,
has little or nothing to do with celebrity projection, or hero recognition.

Glory, rather, has to do with the affirmation of an inseparable connection.

Connection with a God *whose glory is always to have mercy.*

Connection with a God *who is glorious in the saints.*

If all of this is so, then:

- When we celebrate the Feast of All Saints,
we are not putting moral examples, however stellar, on a pedestal.
We are celebrating a dazzling divine splendor
reflected through the countless facets of a brilliant diamond.
- When, the next day, we commemorate All Faithful Departed—
with grief and gratitude,
we are able, step by step, to find release from the sense of guilt and frustration
(be that frustration for those we seem to have lost, or with them).
For all that sense of guilt and frustration ever does is veil the glory
of our irrevocable, inseparable connection with them—
since they—and we—are bathed in the glory of the Lamb of God,
the only light in the New Jerusalem—
a light that, from God's throne,
ceaselessly radiates relentless love.

God's glory, you see, not only transfixes our attention, but totally transforms it.

Therefore, on this day, we in confidence pray:

Oh God, from whose love neither space nor time can separate us.

We thank thee that those who are absent from us are still present with thee.

We trust them to thy loving care.

*We beseech thee to grant that both they and we, drawing nearer unto thee,
may be drawn nearer to one another, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*