

21st March 2021 6 pm Lifted up, Jesus will draw all to Himself

Led by Andrew Attwood. Talk by Andrew Attwood, Readings by Gill Palmer and John Wild, Prayers by Gill Heath

This transcript is only of the readings and the talk

1st Reading: Hebrews 5:5-10

5 In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

‘You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.’

6 And he says in another place,

‘You are a priest for ever,
in the order of Melchizedek.’

7 During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him 10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

2nd Reading: John 12:20-33

20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ 22 Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

23 Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 25 Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

27 ‘Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name!’

Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.’ 29 The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

30 Jesus said, ‘This voice was for your benefit, not mine. 31 Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ 33 He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

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Sermon

[Andrew:] Thank you, John. Thank you, Gill, thank you for the readings. These are very poignant readings as we head into this season of nearly at Holy Week, heading towards the most serious, if you like, the most intense phase of the church's calendar. This is a window, I find, into how Jesus was feeling about what God had called Him to do. In that passage that Gill read, we get a glimpse

from the author to the Hebrews of Jesus' prayer life which included crying and tears. It's an interesting thought: I don't know what pictures you have in your mind when you're thinking Jesus on prayer life, but according to this passage in Hebrews, there is an aspect in His practice of fervent praying, and it says, "to the God who could save Him from death."

It's intriguing to tease out what that might be referring to. It sounds in my mind as though He was pointing perhaps to a sequence of things that happened through Jesus' earthly ministry. We know right at the beginning of His three-year public ministry, He began it in the wilderness, which was clearly a stressful and challenging testing time. And that must have yielded intense praying from Jesus Christ, but it also gives us a clue towards the end of His ministry. We will be thinking of the conflicts He had during those three years with different kinds of parties, often religious leaders, but also the intensity of Gethsemane. As we think towards Holy Week and as we think towards the evening after the Last Supper, we know that they headed, Jesus and the Twelve, headed to Gethsemane, and Jesus is emotional, broken to the point of sweating blood, praying alone at a distance, crying out to His Father. It does say in the Hebrews passage that this was to do with His reverent submission. There is an element there that we picked up in Simone's story to do with obedience, hearing God and doing what God was saying, and something about reverently submitting to what God the Father was asking Jesus to do. It also talks about the idea of this suffering experience having an effect of perfecting Him in some way, through His obedience. These are challenging words to understand when we're talking about the Son of God, but there is something profound and mysterious about Jesus engaging in prayer and wrestling in prayer, like we do, like ordinary humans do, when faced with challenges.

I wonder what your response to that is. It made me remember something from maybe about a year ago, some of you will remember, way before lockdown, how our good friend Robert McGregor, who was the guy who was homeless, he stayed behind the church for quite a period of time. We got to know him and he became a friend to us and we spent time working on helping him with doctors, and just trying to work out getting him some kind of accommodation, and then to all of our surprise, just at the point of him having somewhere to stay, he went downhill, and was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I can remember, along with a few others who were close to him, feeling that strange sense of imminent loss, because, you know, we were the ones who were going to have to agree with the doctors that Robert would need to have his life support switched off. And we visited him, we held his hand, and we talked and we prayed, and we said our goodbyes. There was something extremely moving about the privilege of knowing him for a short time, knowing also that he'd explored faith and kind of had a renewal of faith, even coming to new faith, and him being like a brother that we had just met, and now we were going to have to say goodbye. This passage in Hebrews gives me a remembrance of the kind of the tearing feeling that you get when someone is going, and you're not going to see them any more. There's something agonising about that.

So when I move now to the Gospel reading, we find Jesus now, explicitly anticipating what God is going to ask of Him. You have this intriguing dynamic at the start of the passage in John 12, where it talks about the Festival, and some Greeks coming to have a conversation with Jesus. They first of all talk to Philip and Philip talks to Andrew and they organise, if you like, a little bit of an exchange with Jesus. There's a bit of confusion over who these Greeks are: some people think they're Hellenistic Jews, some people think no, they're actually pure Gentile Greeks, who were wanting to find out about Jesus, because they've heard about Him via reputation. We're unclear, we're not sure, but their coming to Jesus appears to be a trigger for Him to think soberly about what is about to happen very soon. As soon as they come anywhere near Him, He shares that famous line¹,

1 John 12:24-25 [NRSV]

24 "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

And He goes on to say,

25 "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

So there's something triggered by this visit of people who were beyond the nation of Judaism. There's something, I think, that wakens up in Jesus' mind saying, "Now is the time when I do the thing that is going to be for Israel, but actually for the whole wide world, the great world and beyond." And He talks in terms of death.

This sharp phrase that He says at the end of that little passage I read about hating your own life in this world, so that you might gain eternal life, is in such sharp contrast to the spirit of our age. The spirit of our age says, "Seek your heart's desire, hear your own voice, do what pleases you, do what feels natural to you, be authentically you and live it out." And yet here we have the Son of God saying the very opposite: He's saying, "The call of God is to empty yourself, to lay down your life." It's fascinating to think that this was not just theory, some academic conversation: it had emotional import on Jesus. It says in verse 27, "Now my soul is troubled." If you look carefully at the Greek wording for the word 'troubled', it is a word to do with being terrified or agonised; deeply, deeply disturbed, and Jesus the man is saying, "I am absolutely fraught with this and disturbed by this." And He goes on to say, "But what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour." And He says, "Father, glorify Yourself." Jesus knew from the outset that the destiny of His ministry was going to be the Cross. We get glimpses of this all the way through the Gospel accounts, where Jesus knows that the destination is not going to be a throne with a golden crown; it's going to be a cross with a crown of thorns, and He is resolute about that. He's fixed in His mind that this is necessary, but here in this passage in John, we do get a glimpse that's parallel to that sense of feeling you get in the Hebrews passage that Jesus feels the weight of it, like any ordinary human being would.

Let me just tease out a few thoughts that have to do with that. Some people have wondered why would someone of the character of Jesus, why would the Son of God be so fragile, compared to other people in history who seemed to face death bravely and without even the smallest bleating noise? Why would Jesus be so upset, when we think of the kind of things that He said, and prayed when He was in Gethsemane and sweating blood and saying, "Father, take this hour from Me. Can't you pass this cup away from Me?" Why would the Son of God, who was obviously the strongest, most courageous person in the world, why would He be so fragile at this particular point in His earthly life and ministry? We already know from earlier messages in Jesus' teaching that He was not afraid of what human beings can do to you. His wonderful piece of teaching in Matthew where He says, "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body." He says, "Rather be afraid of the one who after the body is dead, can throw your body and soul into hell." Jesus was courageous over the whole idea of what anyone could do to His body, so something else must be behind His fears, something else must be behind His agonising.

Can we just skim forward for a moment and remember some of the words that Jesus said when He was on the Cross. Perhaps most poignantly, perhaps most painfully, He quotes one of the Psalms², and He says, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" All the way through Jesus' ministry, particularly in John's gospel, you hear Jesus talk to God, and call Him 'Father'. There is something profoundly intimate about the way Jesus

relates to Father God, it's a daddy-child relationship, there's intimacy there, there's friendship there, there's care, there's mutual trust there. And yet when Jesus was on the Cross, He doesn't say Father in quite the same way, not until the very end. He quotes this psalm verbatim and He says, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" I think that's the clue. Jesus was anticipating the Cross, knowing that on the Cross, He would feel separation from God, He would feel distanced from His Heavenly Father for the first time in all eternity. Now I'm here, talking about this as though it's an interesting subject, but we cannot ever plumb the depths of what this would have really meant for the Son of God. The intimacy and connection between the Son of God and God the Father is the most precious relationship in the cosmos. Forever from eternity: it is what all relationships are modelled on. And so when Jesus was contemplating death on a cross, it wasn't simply to do with nails or lashes or piercing. It was to do with separation. And it agonised His soul, because He loved His Father so much. I want you to think for a moment: Jesus contemplated the great loss of what He was heading to, and yet, He chose to do it anyway. What could possibly be His motivation? What could possibly deserve the separation of the Son of God? What could be more valuable than that? The only thing that could be higher than that in Jesus' mind, in the Father's heart, is the possibility of being reconciled with human beings, the possibility of bringing true forgiveness to human beings who turn to Jesus Christ. This is the price tag of our forgiveness. This is the value that God puts on us having a relationship with Him. It cost the intimacy between Father and Son.

And so we are introduced to this concept in John's Gospel of glorification. Jesus says³,

“... I have come to this hour. **28** Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

The crowd there thought it was thundering. But this was God speaking. And it's to do with the subject of glory. I don't know what comes to mind when you hear the word 'glory'. And we think of shining lights, we think of something spectacular and wonderful. We think of something beyond imagining. And yet, ironically, Jesus says, "Father, glorify Your name, through what I'm going to do," which in human terms is an extraordinarily inglorious, even disgusting thing. The true glory of God, to our amazement, is the death of the Son of God. The true glorification of Jesus and the true revelation of the Father is the death of the Son for the sake of those who are out of relationship with God. This is so profound, it's almost impossible to truly get our heads round. How does this work? How does this come about? Why is it so glorious? 2 Corinthians 5 verse 21⁴ says this:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Let me read that again. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the glorious transaction. This is the glorious substitution, where the innocent one, the Lamb of God, the innocent lamb, who 'sinned never', becomes the 'sin bearer', becomes the one who on the Cross, because He is the representative of human beings, is separate from God, because God can't be in the presence of sinfulness. And so He cries out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus becomes the kind of the repository of sin on our behalf. This is what it means to glorify God, to absorb wickedness on behalf of others.

Interestingly, Jesus also knew that the manner of His death would be the means by which people will be drawn to Him. It is so contradictory. Anyone who knows anything about crucifixions would find themselves repelled by it and want to turn their face away. And yet Jesus said, "When I am lifted up, when the Son of

3 John 12:27-28 [NRSV]

4 [NIVUK]

Man is lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." It's the opposite way around, because of the purity and the love and the self-sacrifice of this death on the Cross, it becomes like a magnet, the means of drawing people to discover that God truly is love, love beyond anything that we could ever, ever imagine.

So as we contemplate the story of Jesus, heading now towards Holy Week, heading towards the climax of His whole ministry, I just wanted to encourage us this evening to try and get alongside Jesus, anticipating things. Jesus was a man made of flesh like we are. He felt things like we feel. What about you, what is it that you wrestle with? What is it that you struggle to let go of? What might it be that grieves you or makes you afraid? Jesus has been there. In fact He's been further than that. And because of that, He can sympathise. And He can lead us through all the different wrestlings and struggles that we will ever know. How might it be that we can join in in glorifying God? Jesus gives us the invitation. He says we need to also lay down our lives, lay down our preferences: that is what it means to be a follower of Christ, to forget ourselves and to focus on Him and follow Him wherever He leads us. We know, quite literally, for the vast majority of the disciples, the apostles, they followed Him to a painful end. They literally embodied following Jesus and dying like He did. To what extent is there room in your heart to be prepared to follow wherever He leads you?

I'm just going to pause now for a moment and pray. And I just want us to have a moment of quiet to reflect first, so let's be still.

Father God, we thank You for this window into the life of Jesus Christ, we thank You that we get to hear and see and even feel something of what He was going through. Lord, we will never fully understand or comprehend what He was troubled by as He anticipated the Cross. But we praise You, Father, for Him. We thank You that there is no one like Him. Father God, would you give us a heart to worship and love and know Jesus Christ. He reveals what You're like, Father. He shows us Your love. So open our hearts and our eyes, and help us to fix our whole lives on Him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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