

VII Easter A; RCL
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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*These words are offered in the name and spirit of the Risen Christ.
Amen.*

Glory and exaltation are the themes *du jour*. Our opening prayer provides the introduction: O God, the King of Glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your Kingdom in heaven. Our first lesson lays the sound foundation: Jesus, at the very end of his public ministry, is swept up into heaven. The psalm, pre-dating the Christ, echoes the sentiment: Ascribe power to God; his majesty is over Israel, his strength is in the skies. In the gospel, Jesus prays to his Abba: Father, the hour has come... glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

So there it is; glory and exaltation – if you missed it you just might be ready for that second cup of coffee. Before you head off for a shot of Bishop's Blend, listen to I Peter: Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal taking place among you... Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God... Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you... Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

So, in fact, we have multiple themes today: glory and exaltation, threat and anxiety – welcome to first-century Christianity! Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ has ascended, Christ will come again, and, in the moment, things are just a bit testy. The first disciples were sure that God had acted with great power – sin and death were eternally vanquished – but they also knew their particular lives remained stressful.

Sound familiar? We today claim, affirm, and embrace the magnificent victory of Christ; we're also aware of besetting sins, global crises, economic challenges, a threatened eco-system, wars and rumors of war. In our personal lives we struggle to shake loose of problematic and continuing issues; in our public lives we're haunted by a sense of pervasive threat. Christ has ascended into heaven; we remain enmeshed in earthly struggle.

And that, I suspect, is just fine with God. God, theologians tell us, is like a loving and attentive parent; present but unwilling to do for us that which we can do for ourselves. Should that happen, should God intervene precipitously, our moral and spiritual growth will be immediately stunted. I've previously shared one of my favorite cartoons: Two guys are talking and one says to the other, "When I get to heaven, I have half a mind to ask God why he allows so much suffering, so much violence, so much hunger, so much abuse, and so much degradation."

The second fellow responds: “You said you have half a mind – what’s holding you back?” The first answers, “I’m just afraid God is going to ask the same question of me.”

That wise insight reminds us that we’ve been given the keys to the Kingdom. We’re fully equipped by the in-dwelling Spirit to respond to any challenge, personal or global, that diminishes our humanity or the humanity of our neighbor. We have everything we need – resources, intelligence, compassion, creativity, food, air, water, love, wealth – to ensure that every human being on the planet, made in the image of God, is exalted, glorified, lifted up, and loved. To put it simply, the victory is won but the after-party has yet to commence – that delay is our doing, not God’s.

And here now comes the twist – some people, believing this fervently, make actual adjustments in their lives to help move the project forward. Instead of aspiring to an ever-increasing set of perks and privileges, some choose the downward path of Jesus Christ. Some choose to organize their lives in a way that makes them more available for service and more resourced for charity. Some even allow their social worth, their reputations, their bank accounts, and their life-styles to descend so that their heavenly worth might ascend.

Henri Nouwen referred to this mode of on-going conversion as downward mobility: humility, non-violence, non-judgment, sacrificial love, generosity, the release of power, submission, standing under rather than over one’s neighbor. Instead of striving to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, some, in the name and spirit of Jesus, choose to be small. They are like yeast in the loaf – minute and seemingly inconsequential while, in fact, absolutely necessary and fulfilling.

People who make this choice often refer to a passage from the letter to the church in Philippi as their primary source, their motivator. Here it is: “Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a servant. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death – death on a cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow – in heaven, on earth, and in the depths – and every tongue confess, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’, to the glory of God the Father.”

A moment ago I intentionally and repeatedly used the word “some” to describe the cohort practicing this peculiar kind of faith. The self-emptying path is not for everyone. There are other ways to live the spiritual life – create community, pursue sacred beauty, be exuberant in gratitude, repent sincerely and forgive lavishly, call out the Christ in every person, lend coherence to chaos, pray and praise with passion, chase down justice and peace, fill the creation with unexpected and spontaneous love. Those are each divine options, available to

us at any moment. In God's house there are many doors and even more walkways leading to them – all of them well-lit.

The downward path is just one way among many; our personal journey will almost certainly blend several of the possibilities just named. The downward path, one way among many, can be a bit intimidating at first. Those who consider emulating Jesus in this way of life might initially feel out of control, diminished, at risk. To that Nouwen writes, "...when we persevere with hope, courage, and confidence, we will come to fully realize in our innermost being that through the downward road of Christ we will enter with him into his glory."

And that brings us full circle, doesn't it? Glory and exaltation found paradoxically in service and humility. When we choose simplicity, neighbor-concern, right action, God's glorification, Jesus' exaltation, then we know the party, God's gala, is about to begin. So may the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, restore, support, strengthen, and establish you for that specific and holy purpose. And may God – the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit – thereby be exalted on earth and in the heavens forever and ever. Amen.