

Three Dollars Worth of God

Father Larry

The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him." Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly 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. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is the Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light" (John 12:19-36).

"Three Dollars Worth of God," a poem by Wilbur Rees.

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God please.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk
or a snooze in the sunshine.
I don't want enough of God to make me love a homeless person
or pick beets with a migrant.
I want ecstasy, not transformation.
I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth.
I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.
I would like to buy three dollars worth of God please.

Some Greeks, just around this time of year, right before the holy season of Passover, had made a sacred pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They were what the Jews called “God-fearers,” non-Jews who had discovered something deep, beautiful, and strong about the Torah – and the God of whom it spoke. These Greeks were non-Jews who, within the limits imposed upon them by the Jews, were attempting to live the life of Hebrew Scripture. They had very probably read or heard read the very passage from Jeremiah you heard this morning. And it struck some deep resonating chord inside them. They hoped for that relationship with God that is as intimate as a good marriage. They wanted to know the transcendence of God, the goodness of God, the truth of God not as a theory or a philosophy, or ideas about right and wrong or legal requirements for going to heaven, but as a reality in them and a part of them like their own living, beating, pulsating heart.

When they arrived in the city they found Jerusalem buzzing with talk about this Jesus of Nazareth. Everyone was talking about Jesus’ strange, but attractive teaching of love and mercy and compassion, and about what it means to be really alive. The amazing things Jesus is doing and saying is the subject of all the “blogs.” They probably see and hear him for themselves in the temple area. He is, according to Scripture, not a handsome man, he doesn’t look or act like a celebrity people would go crazy for. And, yet, they feel inexplicably drawn to him – somehow sense that he is the answer to the deepest and truest longings in their own heart.

They approach Philip, a disciple with a Greek sounding name and from a region of Galilee heavily populated by Greeks. “Can you help us?” they ask, “We want to see Jesus.” The Original Greek text indicates that this is much more than mere curiosity. They want more than “three dollars worth of God,” they want more than “a pound of the eternal in a paper sack” – they want enough of God to “explode their soul.”

Philip takes Andrew, another disciple with a Greek name, to let Jesus know about this seemingly inconsequential request, but Jesus responds in a surprising way. For Jesus their asking to see him is not without significance, it is a request fraught with a mysterious meaning. It is a little piece of the metaphysical puzzle that helps interpret what is really going on. It says the Pharisees are right, “The whole world” – Jew, Gentile, Greek has gone after Jesus, and that means, “the hour has come.” The hour around which the whole world will pivot has arrived. “Some Greeks are asking to see you.” “Ahhh,” says Jesus, “”times up.” “The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

“Glory” is one of those words, it seems to me, whose basic definition we know, and yet its meaning remains a little out of focus for us. “Glory” is praise – no more than praise it is being praise worthy. It is well-deserved renown, fame, distinction, honor and thanksgiving. What is glorious is a thing of beauty, splendor, magnificence. It is a state of complete gratification, or exaltation. It is a ring of light – it is luminous, shining, dazzling.

In the tenth century, the Moors, Moslems from North Africa, and Spanish Christians were battling for Spain. The greatest general and warrior in Spain was Rodrigo Diaz. There are so many legends about El Cid, as he was called, that it is impossible to

really know very much about his life – other than that he was a person of uncommon personal courage and integrity, a fierce and skilled combatant, a smart military strategist, and greatly loved and trusted by those who followed him. In short, he was a praise worthy person. In the movie version of his life the Moors have captured the City of Valencia. El Cid wins the city back, but a large, fresh, frightening army from North Africa soon lands on the beach. El Cid leads his soldiers out of the walled city to fight the enemy on the narrow seashore. In the battle, as steel clashes and blood spurts, he is struck in the chest by an arrow, and his army, carrying him with them, hastily retreats back into the city. He tells the physicians to break off the arrow without trying to remove it, and insists that alive or dead he must be on his horse in the morning, leading the charge. Sometime during the long night he dies. But with the dawn he is mounted on his horse by his loyal and trusting friends, his cape covering the metal brace that holds him upright in the saddle, the reins are wrapped around one hand and a banner tied to the other. The soldiers ready for battle shout with the confidence and courage with which they have always followed this man – “For God! For Spain! For El Cid!” The great gates swing open and El Cid, on his strong and beautiful war horse, enveloped in the light of the morning sun, or else something more mysterious, gallops rapidly toward the waiting enemy, now seized by fear and hysteria, as they see the very one they thought they had killed, the only one who could defeat them, bearing rapidly down upon them. They turn and run in panic, dropping their weapons they run down the beach and into the water in a futile attempt to get back on the ships that had brought them. It is a theme that has been repeated many times, the story of one who is victorious even in death. It is perhaps only a legend, but nevertheless expresses and images for us the meaning of glory.

As with The Cid, Jesus’ glorification has to do with a life of generosity, integrity, courage, and with an ability to fall in a way that leads to a greater rising – a way of losing that is finding, a way of dying that is living. There is both a way to live and to die that is life giving; and, that is glorious! “Times up. The hour has come. Father glorify your name.” Jesus’ prayer asks that the way he responds to this hour will be to the glory of God’s name, the glory of God’s person. About nine or ten months before my mother died we were talking about some unexpected problem that had come up. And I said, “Well Mom, we never know what’s going to happen next, do we?” She sat quietly in her big green recliner for a while; the only sound was the hum of her oxygen machine. Finally she said, “No we don’t. That’s why I pray every day that God will give me the courage to face whatever comes in a way that I don’t have to be ashamed.”

As Jesus prays there is an answering voice from heaven: “I have glorified, and I will glorify again.” Everything Jesus had done, everything Jesus will do in this crucial hour, the hour that has now arrived is glory – sheer glory.

The listening crowd doesn’t really understand what Jesus is saying, or the sound of the voice. Some said, “Thunder!” Others said, “No, an angel spoke to him.” The words of Jesus and the words of heaven can be understood only by those prepared, like these Greek pilgrims, to accept that Jesus is from God, and that his whole glorious story is determined by his ongoing communion, by his union, by his loving oneness with the Father. Only those truly understand who see that the explanation for the glory of this hour

– the glory we now see in Lent, in the Passion, and in Easter, comes from above. For the Christian enlightenment is interpreting, is seeing everything, absolutely everything, Scripture, your life, your problems, your joys, your hopes, your dreams, your yearnings, your agony and ecstasy in the light of the power, and love, and truth and presence of Christ.

So, many of those present, decent people, religious people, hear the thunder but don't understand it – they neither seen nor hear the glory. It isn't that they are dammed for all time, it's just that, sadly, they miss so much – miss so much of the glory of life. "For a brief time," says Jesus, "the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so the darkness doesn't destroy you. If you walk in the darkness, you don't know where you are going. As you have the light believe in the light – trust in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of the light – children of glory."

John Powell, paraphrasing Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, said: "The glory of God is a man or woman fully human, fully alive." Isn't that what you want? Isn't it what we all want – to be fully human fully alive? But it will take more than three dollars worth of God – more than a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. You'll have to want a new birth more than the warmth of the womb, transformation more than ecstasy. You'll have to want enough of God to disturb your sleep and explode your soul. Amen.