

Fifth Sunday in Eastertide

John 13:31-35; Psalm 148; Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35 begins with Judas. Its opening words “when he had gone out” are a reference to Judas (“he” being Judas). Immediately previous to this passage, Jesus had indicated to Judas at the Last Supper that he knew that disciple would betray him. “So, after receiving the piece of bread,” the text tells us, “Judas immediately went out. And it was night” (13:30). Judas had received the communion of the “body and blood of the Lord”; he had participated in this first Eucharist. Yet he still decided to betray Jesus. So “he immediately went out. And it was night”!

Judas had been offered the choice of full and eternal life in Christ. Yet he had chosen the road to “night”, the road of betrayal. Both men had made a decision that would set their future – one to betrayal that would cost him his life, the other to be glorified through his death and coming resurrection. Jesus made that choice clear by his very next words.

“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’.” (vss. 31b-33)

Jesus has chosen the way of sacrifice while Judas has chosen the way of betrayal. But Jesus’ choice of a sacrificial death was the choice of glorification, while Judas’ choice would result in his condemnation for all time and by all humanity. God would be glorified by Jesus’ death, and Jesus would consequently be glorified through God being glorified. That is, by precisely choosing not to seek glory but in humility to seek the redemption and liberation of humanity, Jesus would be glorified both by God and by humanity down through the ages. “Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:6-7a, 9).

This is an important theme to John, for to this biblical writer the death of Jesus was not an act of humiliation as much as it was an act of glorification. Jesus – and all that Jesus is about creating in His new community – is not crushed and humiliated by death; he and his God are glorified in that death. Jesus’ death does not end with the cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” but with the cry of triumph, “It (that is, my work) is completed!”

That is because, to John, glorification is to make visible in human action the presence of God. The very Greek word translated “to glorify” is the root word for “doxology”! For Jesus to do his work of dying on behalf of the world that God has come to save (John 3:16) is to do doxology! It is to praise God by action, by supreme sacrifice rather than simply by word (talk is cheap).

Thus, Jesus tells the disciples, “I am with you only a little longer. Where I am going, you cannot come”. Jesus in essence is saying, “My doxology of God began when I, the Word, became flesh (1:14). I lived among you, lived as one of you, taught you, pastored you, and shaped you into my people. You have followed me faithfully for these three years. But now my time with you is being drawn to a close. And I am about to undertake a journey that you cannot take with me. I

must do this by myself. I am going to now face death, and it will seem a horrible disaster to you, a denial of all that you have come to embrace about me. But someday you will come to see that my death is not a denial but an embrace of you. You will discover that my death glorifies God and God's intentions for all humanity. Therefore, you will someday come to praise God for what is about to happen to me this night and tomorrow!"

Jesus is about to leave them to walk a path none of them can tread. But that path will be a way of glorification. What then are Jesus' followers to do in the light of Jesus' work of glorification? They are to become a doxology people! And what does it mean to be a doxology people, and live together out of the praise and glorification of God?

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35). What Jesus' whole glorification of God was about was making God's love visible in, to and for the world. To follow in Jesus' way was to live life as God intended it to be lived, life in a community of intimate relationship with God, acting justly toward one another and equitably distributing wealth so that poverty would be eliminated from within your midst. It was, authentically, to be a community (from the Latin, *communitas*, a unified body) and not a collection of people.

But what is the ultimate sign that you are living as a part of that authentic community that glorifies God by its actions? It is love for one another. It is loving each other to the degree that God loves us. It is love – and not truth, nor hope, nor faith, nor the exercise of power – that is the final indicator that these are, indeed, Jesus' people. So Jesus commands all who follow him, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples – if you have love for one another". That is what it's all about.

Psalm 148. This psalm is, in my opinion, one of the finest of the psalms of praise. It begins:

"Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts" (148:1-2)!

The Psalmist, following the same identical pattern set in verse two, then goes through a list of all that should praise God – sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, the earth, sea monsters, the deeps of the ocean, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind (i.e., the elements), mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things (that is, insects and reptiles), birds, kings, the people, princes, rulers, young men and women, old people.

In this naming of all the elements one can imagine, the Psalmist has followed an intriguing order. First, heavenly beings praise the Lord (vs. 2). Second, the universe praises the Lord, in that, in its sheer scale, grandeur, expanse of time and mystery, it testifies to the mind-boggling creative energy of God (vss. 3-6). Third, the earth, with its magnificent geology, its seasons, its elements and its fecundity praises God by its very act of simply being (vss. 7-9).

Fourth, the living creatures – wild animals, domesticated animals, reptiles, insects, birds – all praise the Lord by simply being what they were created to be (vs. 10). And, finally, all humanity both unintentionally and intentionally praises the Lord (vss. 11-14). The kings “and all rulers of the earth”, along with their people unintentionally praise the Lord in that they are subject to the will of the Lord even though they do not acknowledge his authority (cf. Pss. 2, 82; Isa. 10:5-19; 31:1-3). But also God’s chosen people, Israel, intentionally and proactively praise the Lord – both male and female, young and old, those who can reproduce (the Hebrew translated “male and female” [*bakhurim* and *betulot*] means men and women capable of reproduction) and all who cannot reproduce (“young” and “old”) – whoever you are and whatever your age – praise the Lord!

In other words, what the Psalmist is declaring is that everything in the universe, whether intelligent or not, animate or inanimate, cognizant of God’s work or oblivious to God’s creative power – everything, by its very existence, gives praise to its creator! And they ultimately give praise to the Lord because “(God) has raised up a horn for his people”. For God has moved beyond the creation of the cosmos to the historical redemption of humanity, and has done so through “his people” and the “horn” from among them that “he has raised up”.

God has chosen one people to be his people, not in order to be exclusive but to be a means of redemption and liberation to the world. And the vehicle by which Israel acts for the redemption and liberation of the world is through its “horn” (cf. Ps. 89:17, 24, 38) – a ruler called forth by God who will be Israel’s strength and transformation which he will pass to the people! This work of redemption and liberation, therefore, is the final reason that God is to be praised. The creation itself, in all of its complexity, captures our awe for God’s capacity. But God’s work of liberation is what captures our loyalty, love and respect, for it provides for us a “horn” that both sets us free and enables us to become freedom to the rest of the world.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord” (148:13-14)!

Acts 11:1-18 is a re-telling, in the words of Peter, of the story of Acts 10:1-33, an indication of how important and significant this incident was. In the Acts 11 account, “the apostles and believers who were in Judea” (that is, the leadership of the church) call Peter to account for having broken the Jewish Law by “going to uncircumcised men (that is, Gentiles) and eating with them”. His doing so was a clear violation of the dietary and purity codes of Jewish Law (e.g., Lev. 11). Rather than being defensive about his actions, Peter simply tells these church leaders what had happened, and they are overawed.

Peter tells the incident, and that telling causes the leaders of the Church to realize that God was doing something totally new and previously unthinkable. He tells these leaders that he had a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven filled with animals, reptiles and birds declared unclean in the Jewish Law. Three times God commands Peter to “kill and eat”. Three times Peter protests, declaring, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered

my mouth”. And three times God declares, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (11:7-10).

Awakening from his trance, Peter is puzzling the meaning of this vision when “three men” arrive at his house, sent by a Gentile military and political leader, commanding him to come to his home. Peter then states, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us” (vs. 12)

Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius the centurion (Peter doesn’t tell the Hebrew leaders in Acts 11 who this Gentile is, but we know who he is from the Acts 10 account of the story) and is told by him that he, too, had a vision in which an angel instructed him to send for Peter, who would “give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved” (vs. 14).

Peter shares the message of salvation through Jesus with this Roman centurion, and “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I (Peter) remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”” (vv. 15-16). Thus Peter baptized them, and they became Christians.

Peter then concludes, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life”” (vv. 17-18).

This event is of supreme importance both to the story told in the book of Acts and to the future of the Christian movement. Before this event, all of those who named the name of Jesus as Lord, but especially the leadership of the church, saw the gospel as being exclusively to the Jews. It had not occurred to any of them that Gentiles might embrace Christ, nor that the gospel could be taken to anyone other than Jews. Christianity was, for them, a movement within and seeking the reform of Judaism.

After this event, the mission of Christianity had entirely changed. Once the Jerusalem leadership accepted Peter’s action in baptizing Cornelius and his family as believers and welcoming them into the church, the gospel was no longer exclusively Jewish. From this moment on in the book of Acts and within the history of Christianity, the church moved outward into the Gentile world, for “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life”. And we are the direct beneficiaries of that action.

Given the momentous nature of this decision to expand the gospel to all people – Gentiles as well as Jews – what was the evidence given by Peter that so compelled the Christian leadership to embrace this new vision? The evidence is twofold.

First, there was the evidence that this was a God-filled experience. It was not that Peter had come as a result of careful Bible study or theological reflection to the conclusion that Gentiles should be welcomed into the church. Nor was this decision a strategic decision on the part of the Jerusalem leadership seeking to expand the membership and scope of the church. It was through

a clear-cut act of God that called the church to become what no one in the church had ever envisioned it could be. What were those God-given acts?

The intervention of God in this moment is everywhere in the text. Peter has a vision in which God agitates Peter to think in a new way: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”. It was three times God instructed Peter as such, and it was three men who came to request Peter to attend Cornelius. Peter went to visit Cornelius because “the Spirit told me to go with them, and not to make a distinction between them and us” (vs. 12). Cornelius tells Peter “how he had seen the angel standing in his house” and ordering him to send for Peter who would “give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved” (vs. 14). Finally, the Spirit fell upon all the assembled Gentiles upon hearing the gospel message. In other words, what Peter is telling the Christian leaders in Jerusalem was that this was not an action he chose to do, but was rather chosen for him to do by God – that this was a God-dominated and God-orchestrated action!

Second, there was the evidence of Cornelius and his family itself. The Holy Spirit had fallen upon them, and they had responded to Christ with all their hearts. God had acted to save them. Therefore, “who were we that we should hinder God”?

To these early Christians, there were two sure signs of a person’s authentic acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Belief in Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were seen as God’s gifts, not the actions of humans. To Peter, Luke, the early church leaders and (later) Paul, it was not so much that we choose God as God chooses us. As Luke had Peter put it in Acts 2:38-39, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. For the promise is for you, for your church, and for all who are far away, *everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him*”. In other words, God chooses and calls us to be his own, and we respond to that call through our acts of repentance. Repentance is a response, not an initiating action of salvation.

The immutable sign that God had indeed chosen Cornelius and had saved him upon his response of repentance was the manifest and discernible coming of the Holy Spirit upon the one just saved. It was that clear manifestation of the Holy Spirit by Cornelius and his family that convinced Peter that Cornelius’ act of repentance had been received by God. And therefore that meant that Cornelius had been chosen by God, even though he was a Gentile and was considered by Jews “unclean”. Thus Peter understood the meaning of the vision he had been given by God and God’s words to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”. So, although it went against all the theology and doctrine he had ever been taught, Peter took God at God’s word and action, and baptized these Gentiles into the Christian church. The church leaders listened to Peter and concurred with his words, thus officially opening the church to Gentiles. And the church has never been the same since!

Revelation 21:1-6 presents the Bible’s most profound vision of the world as God intended it to be. The “new Jerusalem” is the culmination and apex of God’s design for humanity, for society and even for the environment. God is named in this vision as “the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” (vs. 6). God is the Creator who began to impress his intentions for

humanity in God's very creation of homo sapiens and the world they were meant to inhabit. But God is also the Consummator who brings those intentions to fruition in the formation of the New Jerusalem at the very close of history.

Thus, the reader is reminded in Revelation 21 that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20, KJV). This passage informs us that as the history of humanity made its grand march through time, it often seemed that "the cause of evil prospered" and that the people and systems of society apparently achieved dominance, oppression and exploitation in their lust for power, wealth and control. But God is the Great Consummator as well as Creator, so that "though Truth's portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong, yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own".¹

The author of Revelation presents three features about God's work in creating the new Jerusalem. First, he tells us that the "new heaven and a new earth" are *continuous* with what has gone before. It is not that God has concluded that humanity is unredeemable and thus God must start all over again. Rather, it is that God has acted to transform Jerusalem into a "new Jerusalem", the city into "the holy city", those people and systems separated from God into people and systems at home with God where "God will dwell with them, they will be his people and God himself will be with them" (21:1-3). The world is still God's good creation but sullied by human greed and lust for power. Thus the work that God does in creating the new Jerusalem is the work of redemption, not replacement. God did not make "all new things" but "all things new" (vs. 5).

The second feature of the coming of God's "new heaven and earth" is that it is *urban*. God does not create, at the end of time, a new Garden of Eden. Rather, God creates a "new Jerusalem" – a city, *the city*, the *ideal* city. Salvation history begins in a garden, but ends in a city.

This is an important differentiation. If history would have ended in a return to the Garden of Eden, such an action would have nullified all of human history. It would have made humanity only a "blip" on God's eternal radar. It would have meant that God's human experiment had been tried but failed, so that God had to return back to the Garden and to start all over again.

Instead, what the author of Revelation proclaims to us is that God's human experiment magnificently succeeds, that God emboldens humanity to create what is a peculiarly human institution – the city. It was humans who created the city. It was humans who build the city into an organized, shared way of shaping life together. It was humans who kept destroying their cities and everyone in them. But it was God who affirmed the city-building instincts of humanity by giving us a city "coming down out of heaven" in which we could live and which we could embrace as city the way God intended city to be. And the symbol that this is so is not that the world returns to a Garden of Eden, but rather that God brings the garden into the city (22:1-2; 21:6). The city absorbs the garden, so that the city becomes fruitful and green, cool and verdant! It is the symbol of city that God embraces as the ultimate intention for humanity – not the garden

¹ James Russel Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation", sung to the tune, "Ebenezer", *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco, Tx: Word Music, 1986), # 475.

– a symbol that is communal, social and structured around a commonly-held vision, rather than a symbol that is individualistic and designed only for private enjoyment.

The third feature of God’s “new heaven and earth” is that God’s redemptive work is *terrestrial*, not simply celestial. It is not that the earth is destroyed and all humanity with it. It is that God makes this earth and heaven “new”. That is described in the most picturesque manner: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). The new Jerusalem “comes down” from heaven to earth. This world has been the object and location of God’s work since its very creation, and God does not abandon the world at its end. Rather its end is its apex. History comes to an end with God’s gift of a new Jerusalem to earth, and now existence spins into eternity as all humankind, its social systems and structures, and the environment now reach their fulfillment in continuing relationship with God. God does not abandon the world, but redeems and transforms it into the kingdom of heaven!

And it is God who redeems and transforms it – not humanity. The new Jerusalem is not built, Babel-like (Gen. 11) toward heaven; it is that heaven comes down to earth! It is not our actions, ultimately, that will bring in God’s kingdom, but God’s actions that bring it about. Yet it is God’s actions that have included us in those actions, so that our actions in working for redemption, liberation, justice, environmental care and economic equity have been an integral part of what God has done to bring about God’s kingdom. God has absorbed our work into His. Therefore, we are necessary to God’s work. And we are to work for Christ and his Kingdom as if the building of that kingdom depended upon us. Because, in a profound sense, it does!

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