

The glory of God and the matter of wisdom

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Those who live on the level of the spirit have the spiritual outlook, and that is life and peace. – Rom.8,6

Collect:

Gracious Father, your blessed Son Jesus Christ came from heaven to be true bread which gives life to the world. Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Who would true valour see

Who would true valour see,
let him come hither;
one here will constant be,
come wind, come weather;
there's no discouragement
shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
with dismal stories,
do but themselves confound;
his strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
he'll with a giant fight,
but he will have a right
to be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
can daunt his spirit;
he knows he at the end
shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away;

he'll fear not what men say;
he'll labour night and day
to be a pilgrim.

John Bunyan

Jn.12,20-26

“Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir’, they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.’”

Dear friends

It was an honour for Jesus to be sought by these Greeks. For consider who “Greeks” were: seekers after wisdom; they “look for wisdom” says Paul (1Cor.1,22). So for them to seek Jesus and request to meet him is a clear mark of Jesus’ importance and relevance, of the *kind* of Saviour he is. This is very probably in Andrew and Philip’s mind as they take the request of the Greeks to him. Look! The wise, the lovers of wisdom, have taken notice of Jesus; things are moving in the right direction, Jesus is getting wisdom’s seal of approval and his mission will justify it!

This would have been the expectation, and it reflects a way of thinking that is familiar to us. Are not, after all, the many prizes, awards and honours that we bestow on people, on organisations and projects at seriously dignified ceremonies designed to honour the work and accomplishment of (human) wisdom and skill and drive it forward for the benefit of all? Does not ‘saving’ very naturally belong here? What the wisdom of the wise endorses and approves of, that is worthy of honour. And what we honour, that is marked (and held up) as having wisdom’s approval, as being beneficial, in the grand scheme of things, in the service of human flourishing.

Where in this does Jesus fit, and the gospel? Where salvation? This is really the question that Jesus replies to (not: ‘Will you come and meet them?’). The question is: Will he ally himself, the gospel, faith, to the wisdom of the wise, to those who look for wisdom and believe they know it? Will he go to work by seeking honour from those who make that honour dependent on the approval of wisdom? Will he make common cause with those for whom human flourishing, life, the good are the matter of human wisdom? Will he accept the role of Saviour as offered him by those who honour their own wisdom? Will he do the wise thing and honour the brief and criteria for salvation such as a Nobel peace prize committee, for instance, would draw up?

Jesus’ reply seems almost unconcerned about the Greeks’ request and about an altogether unrelated matter. But that is not the case: the matter of honour is in there and thereby also that of wisdom. *“The Hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”*

Yes, Jesus will be honoured in what is about to happen and by what he is about to do. But he, his work (!), is not such as will be honoured by the wise and their wisdom. They will not recognise in Jesus’ next step the way of wisdom, but that of foolishness. He will be honoured by God.

Here, dear friends, we come up against faith's great dissent from the voice of the world: Not man, but God! Not this is the way to flourishing that we seek honour from each other, have and give honour among ourselves! But that we give honour to God and have honour from Him and with Him. But where is God's honour? And who is concerned whether they have honour with God? And who puts wisdom together with God's honour?

Jesus' way is one which is honoured by God. It leads not as the Greeks, and the thinking and hoping and trusting that they represent, envisage, to a new apex of human wisdom. It is not a way that the wise in their wisdom, the strong in their strength, the honoured in their honours can join him on and stay the same! For either this way becomes hateful to them or it makes their life in this world of giving and receiving honours hateful to themselves for the sake of having honour with God! For Jesus' way is to cross and to death.

In the eyes of the wise this compares foolishly to their own wisdom. But what looks foolish in the eyes of the wise and devoid of honour, is not so. Jesus' way is honoured by God and it honours God. And in doing so it yields what the way of wisdom unconcerned with God's honour cannot and does not: It yields fruit and flourishing, *true* wisdom. That's what the beautiful metaphor is describing: *"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."*

You see, the cross, as it came to be proclaimed by those whom Jesus taught, was the way of procuring the forgiveness of sins and victory over death. That is now had and owned through faith by all who believe in him, which is the way God is honoured, because only God can forgive sins and give eternal life. But it is also the way by which man is saved, and is saved for *God's* honour, for a *new* kind of wisdom.

You see, in Jesus' way to cross and death appears what only here we can truly behold but without which we will not honour God nor give Him glory: The honour and glory *of* God.

What is the glory of God, the honour of His name?! Announcing to the shepherds the birth of Jesus the angel and a "great company of the heavenly host" said, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven' (Lk.2,14). What did these words mean but to say that God's glory is His freedom to come down all the way into our weakness, sinfulness and darkness and be with us? God's glory is His bending down in gracious, giving love to sinners in fear of death in order to lift them up and raise them, speak grace to them and give them eternal life. He empties Himself in favour of sinners, to fill them with His glory!

Is not Jesus - Son of God, born in a manger, dying on the cross – just this, God's glory? *"who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!"* (Phil.2,6-8)

Dear friends, the '*many seeds*' springing from Christ's death for sinners is the flourishing of a new wisdom – God's wisdom – the fruit of which is the compassionate, merciful, self-giving love which bends down to the lowly and lost in order to bind their wounds and bind them to itself. This seed is Christ himself in his life through the Spirit in those who believe on him. In them through faith grows the fruit as they hear the call to follow him and serve not their own glory but the glory of God. And this we shall know, as we do what Jesus says, that God will honour such faith. In Christ we find what in him we seek. AMEN

Lord God, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of who you are for us as you revealed yourself through your Son whom you glorified, is unsearchable. We cannot measure the extent of your love, but in its light we see the limits of our wisdom, the wrongfulness of our pride and the love we have for our own glory. Forgive us our sins. And grant us, we pray in Jesus' name, that faith in him which moves mountains, so that as his servants we may be where he is – on the side of *your* glory, serving.

- time of prayer / intercession – [we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those in the caring professions and for those in positions of leadership and authority over us that they may seek to further justice, rule wisely and guard the values by which a society can flourish, that the course they are on may lead out of the pandemic; for those who have lost loved ones and need the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for the progress brought about by the availability of vaccines; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for God's blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;]

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN