
Seeing the Glory

Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 22, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder how many of you have been in a courtroom. Courtrooms are tense places – but even more so when the person accused is on trial for a capital offense. I wonder if you've seen the face of a person who was about to accept the reality of his own execution. And I wonder if you've looked into that person's eyes, and their countenance, and their whole demeanor, and said, "Your face is like the face of an angel." An angel is a being who's seen the glory of God. Have you seen the glory of God? Do you want to? That's what we're talking about this morning.

A while ago I was in a class with a room full of students at the Divinity School and I stopped the class and asked them a question, because I found I was suddenly curious. I said, "How many of you think that Christianity is fundamentally taking the chaos of the world, and imposing order on it – and how many think Christianity is taking the order of the world, and introducing chaos into it?" It turned out the majority believed Christianity was about imposing order on chaos. Maybe a simpler way of asking the question is, "Do you see the church as a parent who tries to control an unruly child called the world, or do you think we should think of the world as the parent and the church should be more like the unruly child?" To answer such a question is to recognize how far we've come from the social circumstances of the church as the Acts of the Apostles describes it. In contemporary America, the churches are generally seen as forces for order, cohesion, and even social control. But in the Acts of the Apostles, the church is a very different proposition.

The apostle Stephen wouldn't have seen himself as a force for order. He wouldn't have identified with the embattled parent. Stephen would see Christianity as more like the unruly child. For him, there were two dominant forces in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Christ, and they were the Roman governor and the Jewish leadership. The church was a bundle of trouble, upsetting the uneasy status quo. But quickly Stephen discovered what Christianity was really all about.

At the Last Supper in John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what it means to be a Christian. He says, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." Just stay with those words a moment. They suggest three stages of faith. There's believing in Jesus, there's doing what Jesus does, and then there's this astonishing third element – doing greater things than Jesus. What could that possibly mean? When we turn to Acts chapters 6 and 7, it's as if we find that Luke is giving us an immediate answer to that question.

The story begins where the life of any organization dwells – with a mixture of logistical problems and lingering resentments. There are too many mouths to feed, and the Greek-speaking believers are cross because it seems their people were getting smaller portions than the Hebrew-speakers. The answer is a division of labor. The disciples are relieved of the soup-kitchen duties, and seven deacons are appointed to run the food-distribution side of the operation. Stephen is one of the seven. I want to talk about five windows Stephen gives us onto what it means to be a Christian

Here's the first window. Stephen feeds the hungry. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated – no long words like systemic injustice or cycles of poverty. Stephen just feeds the hungry. To be a Christian involves feeding the hungry. You fed the hungry lately? Is it time you did? The story of Stephen begins with the conviction that being a Christian means turning faith into concrete acts of love. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to feed the hungry. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the second window Stephen gives us onto what it means to be a Christian. It turns out beautiful and surprising things started happening around him. Things that made people think. Things that made people wonder. Things that turned people towards God. To be a Christian should mean people look at your life and see traces of grace, say there's something about you, see that you have a peace, a presence, a power, a purpose that makes people think, makes people wonder, turns people towards God. Do people say that about you? Is it time you started letting God do beautiful things through you and in you? The story of Stephen shows that being a Christian means people will notice a difference in and around you. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to draw people toward God. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the third window Stephen gives us onto what it means to be a Christian. He faces opposition. A lot of influential people don't like what he's doing and what he's saying and what's happening around him. Anyone can be a Christian when they're going with the flow and swimming with the stream. But what's it like when people hate you, undermine you, despise you, make up stories about you, plot your demise, rejoice in your downfall? That's what they did to Stephen. And what was his response? The story says, "All who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." How do you react when people tell lies about you? The story of Stephen shows that being a Christian starts to really count when everyone turns against you. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to respond to hostility with grace. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Do you want to see the glory?

Here's the fourth window Stephen gives us onto what it means to be a Christian. He tells the story of God, of Israel, and of Jesus. He shows how Jesus is the heart of God, how God has tried every possible way of being close to us, and will never give up on us. To be a Christian means being a living witness, it means telling the story of Jesus in word and deed. Is that what your life looks like? Is it a story that makes no sense without Jesus? The story of Stephen shows that being a Christian means being grafted into the story of Israel and Jesus. That's great. But that's not the whole story. It's good to tell people God's story. But remember Jesus' words, "You will do greater things than these." Do you want to see the glory?

Do you want to go that little bit further? Do you want to go beyond just being a Christian and fulfilling the bare necessities of discipleship, until you go into new territory with God as your guide? Do you want to feel again the wonder of being a child, a child of God, a child of adventure and discovery and grace? Do you want to see the glory? Let me tell you a story.

Those of you who follow track and field will know that something very remarkable happened in the men's marathon at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952. The marathon traditionally takes place on the last day of the games, after all the events have been completed. In the 1952 games the sensation of the men's track and field program had been a Czech runner named Emil Zatopek. He'd already won the five- and ten-thousand meter gold medals earlier in the week. Far from being exhausted from his achievements, he thought he'd go a step further and try his hand at the marathon. He wasn't satisfied with doing exactly what he'd planned to do. He wanted to see the glory. He'd never run a marathon before, but he thought, I have a chance that very few people ever get. Around half way through the marathon, a bunch of runners broke away from the field. One of them was Zatopek. Before long there were only two runners left fighting for the lead. One was the English world record-holder Jim Peters. The other was Zatopek. After about 15 miles, Zatopek turned to Peters, and said, "Is this about the right pace, or should we be going faster?" Peters replied, half joking, "Ideally, we should be going faster." So Zatopek went faster, and ended up winning the race by around half a mile and breaking the Olympic record by a full six minutes.

Zatopek could have stuck to the original plan to succeed at the five- and ten thousand meters. But he wanted to go further, much further. He could have run a conservative marathon, it being his first. But he'd caught a glimpse of something very special. No one had ever won all three races at an Olympics. No one's ever done it

since. You can almost hear him thinking, 16 miles into the race, “You will do greater things than these.” He wanted to see the glory. And he discovered resources and strength and resilience he never knew he had.

Like Emil Zatopek, Stephen went beyond just being a Christian. Yes, he fed the hungry. That was basic. Yes, he let God do beautiful things in him. That became second nature. Yes, he met hatred and hostility with the face of an angel. That was because he saw God even in his enemies. Yes, he told the story of God. He knew no other story to tell – how could he keep from singing? But Stephen didn’t just want to be a Christian. He wanted to see the glory.

And Stephen did see the glory. The members of the council were enraged at Stephen’s speech, and got ready to stone him. But Stephen “Gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Stephen saw the glory. To see the glory he had to be prepared to go beyond the basics of discipleship. He had to go out of his depth. He had to be ready to die as Jesus died.

Let me tell you about a man who saw the glory. His name was Leonard Wilson. He was an Anglican bishop in Singapore during the Second World War. When the Japanese invaded he was interned. For many months he suffered regular beatings and torture. He constantly prayed to God for patience, for courage, and for love. God gave him plenty of opportunities to exercise such virtues. In the middle of the torture his Japanese guards asked him if he still believed in God. He said, “I do.” So they asked, “Why doesn’t your God save you?” Bishop Wilson said, “God does save me. He doesn’t save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but he saves me by giving me the strength to bear it.”

Day after day, Bishop Wilson had to cower in the face of his persecutors. Many times he prayed, “Father, I know these men are doing their duty. Help them to see that I am innocent.” Yet he looked at their faces as they stood round, taking it in turns to flog him, and their faces were hard and cruel, and some of them were evidently enjoying themselves. But Wilson saw them as they had been, as little children with their brothers and sisters – happy in their parents’ love. He saw them not as they were, but as they were capable of becoming – and that stopped him from hating them.

He faced real hunger. It was overwhelming. One of the other prisoners was allowed food from the outside. The man could have eaten all of it, but instead, never a day passed without his sharing it with some people of the cell. Others were inspired to follow suit – and began to share with one another.

After eight months Bishop Wilson was released, and for the first time got into the sunlight. He had never known such joy. It seemed like a foretaste of the Resurrection. For months afterwards he felt at peace with the universe, although he was still interned. He had seen the glory of God, and what he had discovered was this: “God is to be found in the Resurrection, as well as in the Cross, and it is the Resurrection that has the final word.”

Let’s come back to Stephen for a moment. Look at the way Stephen dies. Stephen’s surrounded by the Jerusalem Council. Jesus was surrounded by the Jerusalem Council. Stephen’s filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. Stephen’s dragged out of the city. Jesus was led out of the city. As Stephen dies, he prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” As Jesus died, he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Stephen prays, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Stephen died like Jesus. That’s when he saw the glory.

Stephen’s life teaches us that being a Christian means you spend a lot of time with the hungry. It means you let God do beautiful things in you. It means you tell the story of Israel and Jesus anywhere and everywhere. But then one of three things can happen. Maybe like Leonard Wilson you face the brutal face of the world’s hatred through no fault of your own. Maybe like Stephen you live a life that infuriates people so much that they harass and attack you. Or maybe, like Emil Zatopek, you realize that God’s given you something special, and you feel a call to seek out that little bit more.

Three ways to see the glory. None of them's easy. All of them are about living so close to the boundary between life and death that you can see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. That's what it means to be a Christian. Now here's a question for you: Do you still want to do greater things than these? Do you still want to see the glory?