

HUMAN GLORY:

a sermon praught at High Mass
at the Church of the
Ascension & St Agnes,
Washington D.C.,
on All Saints', 2009,
by the Rev'd Dr
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Lesson**Isaiah xxv⁶⁻⁹**

And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things,

a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.

And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces;

and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.

And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us:

this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Epistle**Revelation****xxi^{1-6a}**

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:

for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven,

prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying,

Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them,

and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death,

neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain:

for the former things are passed away.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.

And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

And he said unto me, It is done.

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

The Holy Gospel**John xi³²⁻⁴⁴**

Then when Mary was come where JESUS was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. When JESUS therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

JESUS wept.

Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said,

Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

JESUS therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

JESUS said, Take ye away the stone.

Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

JESUS saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And JESUS lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. JESUS saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

Words from today's first reading:
The LORD will destroy in this mountain
the face of the covering cast over all people,
and the veil that is spread over all nations.
In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

I'D LIKE YOU TO CALL TO MIND what the sun looks like at noon, when you stare directly into it. Can we remember what it looks like?

No, of course we can't. We can't remember, because we've never seen it. Glance at the sun on a cloudless day and you get an uncomfortable red-yellow blemish on your vision, which takes some time to fade away. Glimpse the sun through binoculars and you burn out cells in your retina. Look at the sun for a few minutes with the naked eyes, you render yourself temporarily stone-blind. A little longer and you do irreversible damage.* The sun is, in sense, invisible to us. You and I have never seen it. We have never stared at it, because we can't.

There's nothing wrong with the sun. That globe of supreme flame lights up the worlds, it gives us and every living thing the energy to exist. There's nothing invisible about the sun: the fault is all with us. Our eyes are too weak to behold its physical glory.

Now, I want you to imagine the sun expanding. It's no longer a single glorious orb moving across the sky: it swells. I want you to picture that orb growing until it fills a whole quarter of the sky – until it reaches from horizon to horizon. There is no blue left above us, only the whirl of that triumphant blazing gold. Imagine the splendour, the terror of such a thing. We hide ourselves in basements, and still the solar glory is insupportable. Brilliance breaks in under the crack of the shut basement door, violent as a red-hot poker, piercing our eyelids. We scream for the intolerable resplendence to cease. But it does not; we die of excessive light, and still the sun expands. It engulfs the planets, the galaxy. It expands beyond the limits of space,

** Don't take my word for it. Drs Tso and La Piana, evidently rather creepy chaps, tried the experiment on people who were going blind anyway: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1209815>. More fun sun-blindness facts at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun#Observation_and_effects

endless, and swells in beauty, majesty and power.

I offer this vision as a hint of what the glory of God must be like.

The glory of God is a phrase we bandy about. But ponder what the glory of God actually means. Remember, the whole created cosmos is a trifling thing compared to its Maker. Julian of Norwich, the mediæval English mystic, once found a lytil thyng þe quantite of a hasyl nott. lyeng in þe pawme of my hand, a little thing the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of my hand. She asks what it is, and God says, with crushing simplicity, all þat is mad. Julian is holding the universe. I merueled howe it myght laste. for me þought it myght soden ly haue fall to nought for lytyllhed. I wondered how it could possibly endure, for I thought it might suddenly fall into nothingness because of its littleness. I was answered in my vnderstondyng. It lastyth & euer shall for god louyth it.[§] The universe is a slight, drab, flimsy object compared to the God Who created it.

There's a staggering remark at the climax of the New Testament. At the end of all things there appears at last a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from Whose Face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.[¶]

That's the final truth. The worlds are precarious snowflakes fluttering before the blazing infinity of God's glory, the brightness of His face, that solar abyss. [It is a perpetual miracle that the universe, in its frailty, does not simply vanish.]

So how are we deal with God's infinity? If even the mere physical glory of the sun, which is just a ball of fire, blinds us and eludes us, how can we possibly know God? How can our tininess reach up to His immensity? The very idea of God burns out our finite minds more certainly than the noontide sun burns our eyes.

Must we despair of sighting Him? Whole philosophies, whole religions are founded on this despair: that God must remain invisible to us, unknowable.

There's only one way out of this despair, only one solution: a solution so extreme only God could dare to conceive of it, let alone perform it. God could become visible to Man by – becoming a Man. He could humble Himself unthinkably; He might appear amongst us, as a human embryo, then a human baby, a human adult, one among the millions, walking about. Five foot six of brown-skinned manhood, with dusty feet, wearing sandals: and nonetheless the undiminished

§§ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/julian/revelations.ii.ii.html> and <http://www.umilta.net/tablet.html#HazelNut2>

brightness of the glory of God, the very image of God's essence.[†] God could do that; and He did! And He does. In a few minutes, when Fr Davenport holds aloft the newly consecrated Host, we shall be looking on the flesh of God. We shall be seeing the glory from which the seraphim and cherubim veil their undying eyes. Our eyes shall see the king in His beauty.[‡]

To the eye of faith, the Blessed Sacrament is dazzlingly glorious as the sun at noon. Yet we are allowed to gaze on it, to approach it. For the love of God is even more unfathomable than His power. God subdues His glory to our littleness. We are allowed to behold His glory, and it does not consume us; we are even able to nourish ourselves on it.



Now, these truths are truths we ponder every Sunday, at every Mass. The glory of God, at which I have so clumsily hinted, is made tangible to us in JESUS Christ, our Lord, Who is Man and God, both. And the glory of Christ is made present in the Eucharist.

Yes; but more than that. Today, particularly, at this Mass, the Church tells us to think of something more. The same divine glory reaches us in another way, too.

It would have been enough for God to save us, enough to give us Himself as a Man; more than enough; more than we could ever have thought to ask! Yet He gives us even more. Not only does He show us His glory, He shares it with us. We human beings behold the divine glory in each other.

That is most amazing.

What I mean is that Christ does not simply save us, He hallows us. He does not simply forgive us and rescue us from death, He slowly remakes us. He remakes us so that we become entirely holy, which is to say, entirely filled with His own glory. We become like Him, little Christs, reflections of Christ's uncreated splendour, which is the very glory of the Father. The process will take a long time, no doubt; certainly it's going to go on for a long time after we die; but in the end we shall also flash forth the blinding glory of God.

This process is called sanctification – a very ugly, boring-sounding word. But the doctrine of sanctification is not boring. It's an

†† Hebrew i³.

‡‡ Isaiah xxiii¹⁷.

absolutely staggering idea. And it bites home. For it describes what is happening to you and to me. The process of sanctification, of being remade, is what is going on in us. Our lives may seem meandering and pointless, but they are lived under the sway of the everlasting mercy: they do have a point. The point is that the diseases and disorders of our souls are being plucked out (sometimes painfully), so that the glory of God can be poured into us, little by little, as we become fit to bear it.

We are being, as it were, filled with fire, until at last we can stand in the sun, unburned, unblinded. Little by little, almost imperceptibly, we are being made fit for the court of heaven. We are being made glorious so we can endure forever the presence of the glory of the One.

That is what sanctification means.



In most Christians, living and dead, this process of sanctification is still going on. But in some it is not. In those Christians, it is complete. In them the divine victory is already absolute. They are perfected, they can never fall again, they have been drenched in the eternal splendour. They shine forth without flaw. They dazzle the seraphim. They mirror the glory of God.

The technical name for such people is saints, the sanctified ones, the hallows. And every first of November the Christian Church goes mad with joy celebrating the fact that saints exist. Today's the Feast of All Saints. It is time for us to go mad with joy.

The glory of God, the raging beauty of the sun at noon: where can we see it? Not just in Christ; not just in the Blessed Sacrament; but also in certain human beings – the heroes of the faith, God's saints.

Today is the Feast of All Saints, so we're bound to remember the saints today. But here we can never forget the startling doctrine of sainthood, because in this parish church it is painted for us above our altar. Every Sunday we have to look at it, and it should always give us a jolt.

Jan de Rosen was the name of the artist responsible for this mural.[∞] Above all, as you can see, is Christ, wonderfully painted. He is a Man, even a suffering Man, twisted as He was on the gallows; yet He is divine, reigning over the universe, ringed about with the scarlet

^{∞ ∞} Or is it a fresco? Anyway: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Henryk_de_Rosen and http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/crypt/cry_19970919.shtml

wings of the adoring seraphim.

That is Christ. And below Him are seven of Christ's friends, seven saints, seven Christians who lived and died some while back. A cosmopolitan bunch! Two Italians, a Scot, a Spaniard, an Egyptian, a Briton, which is to say a sort of Welshman, and a young Jewish woman. Two were important bishops, one a mere deacon deep in the provinces; one a patrician girl living at home, one a queen, one an obscure foot-soldier at the edge of the Empire. The young Jewish woman was chosen to be the Mother of God. Her praise will never cease. But humanly speaking, even Mary looked much like every other matron in the Near East. For De Rosen paints these seven saints as they looked in their lifetimes, warts and all. Augustine of Canterbury, the saint on the far left, looks like a troubled, inadequate bishop baffled and repulsed by his flock – which is what he was, in part. Vincent, the saint on the far right, appears to be an oily young curate on the make. But whatever flaws they had have long been cleansed away. There is, as we might say, a family resemblance. They look strangely like Christ. The same formidable splendour flashes from His face and from theirs. That is what the doctrine of sanctification means. We are being remade until we are strangely like Christ. These seven Christians delight and they terrify us: they are already reflections of the glory of God.

Naturally, we have a prejudice in favour of the saint second from the left, the teenager with the killer eyes. She is St Agnes of Rome, patron of this parish. Think what that dress of hers must have cost, with its eight-inch hem of gold thread – or her hairdo! She peers down at us from the vertiginous height of fashion, radiating at once icy command and passion, which you have to be an aristocrat to do. And not just an aristocrat, a young woman. And not just a young woman, a teenager.

Agnes was quite unbelievably grand. Although only thirteen, she was a Roman noblewoman, and she never forgot it: a patrician of the patricians, scion of a most ancient family, living at the height of



society at the centre of the world. Her family happened to be Christian, and one of the last of the pagan Emperors persecuted them. Agnes was utterly resolute in her faith in Christ, and on 21st January, 304, the Emperor ordered her burned alive. She died in triumph. Her courage terrified everyone and converted thousands. She has been honoured on earth ever since.

That's St Agnes. I mean, that's Agnes as she looked to her contemporaries, before she was arrested. But that's not Agnes she is now. If we saw Holy Agnes as she is now – immortal, ecstatic, singing before the great white throne, before Him Who sits upon it, from Whose Face earth and heaven flee away – we would cover our eyes and scream with terror.

There's a intoxicating phrase in the Apocalypse, when St John glimpses Our Lady in the height of heaven: I saw, says John, a woman clothed with the sun.^Δ Exactly: that's what all the saints are like. The excoriating divine glory, for which the burning brightness of the sun is our only possible metaphor, has been given to them. They are each of them greater than the physical universe. Augustine, Athanasius, Mary, Alban, Margaret, and Vincent are just Christians, Christians like us, who have been clothed with the sun.



Have you ever nursed the suspicion that you are a god living amidst gods? I mean, has it ever struck you that your family, your neighbours, your fellow parishioners, are infinitely precious – and somehow gigantic? We potter through our little lives; nonetheless, does it ever seem to you that we are all hidden abysses of glory?

Well, whether we've ever felt that or not, it's the truth. That's what Isaiah meant when, in our first reading today, when he says that on the eternal mountainside of paradise

The Lord will destroy ... the face of the covering cast over
all people,
and the veil that is spread over all nations.

It's a stupendous prophecy. We know that covering cast over all people, the veil spread over all nations. It's what let's us treat ourselves, and other people, and other peoples, as if they were trivial. It's what let's us regard human beings, made in the image of God, as

ΔΔ Apocalypse xii¹.

rubbish.

Well, they're not rubbish; that's an illusion; the veil is being torn, the image is being revealed. We are in the process of being hallowed. Where the saints are, all of redeemed humanity shall be; what St Agnes is, you are fated to be.

Consider that workmate who annoys you. One day the covering cast over him will be destroyed, you will see him as he is, once sin and weakness have been torn away. He will blaze like the sun at noon. You could not now endure to see him as he will be when his sanctification is complete. Remember that when he next annoys you. Even the stranger I see trotting across the road in front of my car, against the lights, a woman I'll never see again in this life: she is (probably) destined for glory, and I'm not really seeing her unless I remember to feel awe at the sight.

Tomorrow we remember the dead. The Church wisely tacks a sombre festival, All Souls, on to All Saints. Today we look forward to paradise, and tomorrow we remember what lies in between paradise and now: our physical destruction. Today we celebrate human glory, tomorrow we recall the death of all we have loved, and our own coming death, too. Today's bright feast makes tomorrow's black commemoration bearable. Tomorrow's realism makes today's exaltation serious. And today's Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus, brings exaltation and horror together. Lazarus is as dead as dead can be: he stinks, so that the onlookers cover their noses when the tomb is opened; Christ groans with horror at death. He weeps. There is no evasion here. Even when Lazarus has regained life, he's grotesque, hopping out of the grave blinded and bound in his wrappings. That's a realistic picture of death, and therefore we can take Christ at His word when He insists: Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

It is absolutely certain that I am going to die. I shall be as dead as ever Lazarus was, and lie with all dead in the darkness. It is absolutely certain that, barring some disaster of my own making, I am going to be united in eternity with Christ, Who was also once dead as Lazarus; that I shall see, and even in a staggering way be, part of the glory of God.]

In the end, all of us are saints. There will, one day, be a St Susan Hawfield, for instance. And a St Owen Burdick. There will be a St Lane Davenport and a St Robert Armidon, and even, improbable as it seems, a St Richard Major. That is why the Feast of All Saints' is so intoxicatingly joyous. The hallowed company of heaven are not only our friends, allies, predecessors, they are our guarantee. They prove

that it's possible for such tumbling Christian mortals as ourselves to become a blaze of holiness, because it has already happened: to St Agnes, and to countless others.

The Lord will destroy the face of the covering cast over all people. The clouds around us are slowly dispersing; and one day you and I will stand sun-bright before the Face of the One. You will endure His glory by being glorious. Today is the promise. And if that does not set us singing with joy, I can't think what will.

Enough! –

Now may Our Lady, the Mother of God, pray for us!
May Augustine of Canterbury and Agnes our patron pray for
us,
with Athanasius and Alban, Margaret and Vincent.
May all the blessed saints and martyrs pray for us,
until we come to where they are, and see what they see,
even the glory of God:
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
ever One,
through ages of ages.
AMEN.

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‘A brightness poured from head to head’: afterthoughts

On the present glory of our neighbours, I commend Edwin Muir’s poem ‘The Brothers’:

Last night I watched my brothers
play,
The gentle and the reckless one,
In a field two yards away.
For half a century they were gone
Beyond the other side of care
To be among the peaceful dead.
Even in a dream how could I dare
Interrogate that happiness
So wildly spent yet never less?
For still they raced about the green
And were like two revolving suns;
A brightness poured from head to
head,
So strong I could not see their eyes
Or look into their paradise.
What were they doing, the happy
ones?
Yet where I was they once had been.

I thought, How could I be so dull,
Twenty thousand days ago,
Not to see they were beautiful?
I asked them, Were you really so
As you are now, that other day?
And the dream was soon away.

For then we played for victory
And not to make each other glad.
A darkness covered every head,
Frowns twisted the original face,
And through that mask we could not
see
The beauty and the buried grace....

It’s an extremely fine image, that brightness pouring from head to head like two revolving suns. Muir’s two brothers died young of some horrid early twentieth century epidemic: they weren’t different from anyone else: and yet he has this extraordinary vision of their buried grace. For a meditation on Muir by my ontime bishop, Lord Harries:

<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?PageId=108&EventId=830>

What are the saints in glory are like? C.S. Lewis remarks (Letters to Malcolm, II; page 13 at

<http://books.google.com/books?id=5P6zsKbsa6wC&lpg=PP1&dq=letters%20to%20malcolm&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>: “I think the ‘Low’ church milieu that I grew up in did tend to be too cosily at ease in Sion. My grandfather, I’m told, used to say that he ‘looked forward to having some very interesting conversations with St. Paul when he got to heaven.’ Two clerical gentlemen talking at ease in a club! It never seemed to cross his mind that an encounter with St. Paul might be rather an overwhelming experience for an Evangelical clergyman of good family. But when Dante saw the great apostles in heaven they affected him like mountains....”

And note the scream of diabolical dismay in Lewis' Screwtape Letters, over a Christian at the moment of death. The saved man not only beholds the angels, "he saw Him. This animal, this thing begotten in a bed, could look on Him. What is blinding, suffocating fire to you [the Christian's defeated tempter fiend], is now cool light to him, is clarity itself, and wears the form of a Man."

Incidentally, it's worth reflecting on the Protestant horror of venerating the saints. Catholic theologians and preachers still feel obliged to add a disclaimer, especially when praising Our Lady: Of course nothing in such veneration is meant to take away from our worship of the One God, creator of Mary as of everything else, &c &c. Is this not rather unnecessary? I've met stupid parishioners in my time, and I have never come across anyone with the slightest confusion about the difference between God and God's Elect. Polytheistic idolatry of the saints would be terrible if it happened, but I deny it ever happens. I defy anyone to produce the rankest peasant from Co. Cork or Sicily who thinks Mary is the equal of her Maker. Can't we stop worrying about this?

And instead, mightn't we remark that this anxiety about protecting God's uniqueness is oddly neurotic? Where is the ultimate source of all neurosis? Hell. Where was the ultimate source of the Reformation? Hell – I mean that that the campaign to mutilate the creed, belittle the sacraments, idolatrise Scripture and shatter the Church was of diabolical inspiration, working of course through men who were merely bestial (Henry VIII, Luther), and men who were confused and partly well-meaning (Zwingli perhaps), as well as men who were knew what they were doing and were Hell's conscious agents (Calvin, Knox). Satan wishes he were God, and if he were God he would be hysterically jealous of honour paid to anyone else. Protestantism still bears the stink of its origin in his disordered consciousness.

However, God is God, and is without anxiety. He is pure generosity. I can't see why we should be so nervously anxious on His behalf. Fie, then, on the heretics' caution, about the veneration of the saints, and about everything else.

For more about the story of St Agnes, embellished over the centuries:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01214a.htm>.

Fr Davenport and I once venerated a relic (her skull, in fact, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SantAgneseAgone-TestaSAgnese01-SteO153.JPG>) in the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, which faces Rome's Piazza Navona. In agone doesn't mean what you think it means.

In the 1850s the clever, creepy Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nicholas_Patrick_Wiseman.jpg) wrote a novel, a terrible, wonderfully terrible novel about St Agnes, called *Fabiola* or, the Church of the Catacombs. Wiseman pictures Agnes, teenaged cousin and chum of his heroine, as soft-spoken and cuddly. This doesn't seem very likely to me.

"Why," answered Agnes with a look of glowing earnestness and in tones of artless simplicity, "he has girded my hand and neck with precious gems and has set in my ears rings of peerless pearls."

If you can bear hundreds of pages of prose like that, you're a better man than I

am; Agnes and Fabiola await you online: http://books.google.com/books?id=f6B53lLcQuYC&dq=%22Fabiola+or,+the+Church+of+the+Catacombs%22&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=fc3lSpyvNMG2lAeSyZXoCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBIQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=&f=false

For more about Alban, the first British martyr, who wasn't even baptised, took in a fleeing Christian priest out of mere heroic kindness, then donned his robes to let him escape, and died crying *Deum verum ac vivum, qui universa creavit, adoro semper et colo*, words still repeated every day at the cathedral built over his tomb: <http://kingsgarden.org/English/Organizations/LCC.GB/LCIS/Scriptures/LivesOfSaints/SaintAlban/BedeTheVenerable.html> and http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/bede/martyrdom_of_alban.shtml

For more about the other saints on our reredos:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Margaret_of_Scotland,
<http://books.google.com/books?id=1lsKAAAAIAAJ&lpg=PA364&ots=jEEJpW0Og2&dq=gibbon%20athanasius&pg=PA362#v=onepage&q=gibbon%20athanasius&f=false>,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_of_Saragossa

The title-page shows today's Evangelist, John, having a vision on Patmos: the twenty-four elders, princes or crowned representatives of redeemed humanity. *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, in the Musée Condé, Chantilly.