



The Tree of Shame has become the Tree of Glory

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Easter Sunday 2017

*Acts 10:34-43*

*Colossians 3:1-4*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

I want to invite you to think for a moment about when you last felt that you encountered the glory of God. Just take a little moment and think...

In many ways, it is a funny concept, glory. Human glory is perhaps easier to identify; those moments at the Oscar awards ceremony or public acclamation of success, beautiful clothes, fine wine, camera flashes, talks of thanks; those are the kind of images that come to mind when I think of human glory.

Godly glory doesn't really fit within those same frameworks. If it did, our biggest Christian festival would not be Easter Day, but Palm Sunday. Because it was last week when we re-enacted the triumphal entry into Jerusalem where there was adulation, there were crowds cheering and shouting, that is where there was the most human glory in the life of Jesus. But that glory didn't last very long, barely a week, eh? The shouts of acclamation turned to shouts of accusation very quickly. Human glory can be a little bit like that, as most celebrities and public figures know only too well. So, if Godly glory isn't like that what is it like?

When you look through scripture you can see a pattern emerging in relation to glory. The glory of God and the presence of God sometimes seem to be one and the same. God's presence is glory. God's glory is God's presence.

So, when you thought about when you encountered the glory of God, I imagine we each thought of so many different types of moments, moments in which we felt that God was present to us or, maybe more accurately when we were present to God. I want to share with you about a particular moment when I encountered the glory of God many years ago. It was a time when I came across an old folk tale story book called *The Three Trees*, which I found in a charity shop. We were travelling in England when the children were very little, Zac 2 and Joe about 5 months old at the time. It was one of those complicated trips where I was speaking at a conference in Europe, taking a wedding in England and visiting with the different groupings of my family (the kind of trip that those of us expats relate to when we have to constantly double end scholarships or work to allow us the chance to return home and maintain connections with our family). It was a lot of travelling and adjusting for two small children and their parents. At the end of another day of transition, connecting with new people and the consequential behaviour implications for our little family, we all somewhat lost the plot. After an evening in which we shouted at each other, saying things we would instantly regret, and instead of being this wonderful example of a Holy family we were miserable and upset. Feeling very, very, very low, I took out this new book to read as the bedtime story.

The tale of *The Three Trees* goes a little bit like this. There are three trees on a hillside and each of them shares their ambitions. All the ambitions are filled with glory. One wants to be a treasure chest to carry precious jewels. One wants to be strong, to be a mighty ship to carry kings. One wants to stay right there and become the tallest tree in the world so that when everyone looks at her they will immediately think of God, because she is the best a tree could ever be.

Well the three trees all get cut down. The first doesn't become a treasure chest, but an animal trough. The second doesn't become a mighty warrior ship, but a simple rough fishing boat. The third is confused when she is just sawn into big planks and dumped in a corner.

Time passes. One day the first tree, now an animal trough, finds itself used to hold a new born baby on a dark night in a stable...and realises that he is holding

the greatest treasure in the world. One day the second tree finds himself carrying a group of rag tag fishermen in a storm on the sea. One man stands amid the storm and speaks peace and calm to the wind and waves...and the second tree realises that he is carrying the king of heaven and earth. Then one day the third tree finds herself nailed into a cross and hoisted on the back of a man who is condemned to die. The story says, she felt ugly and harsh and cruel.

And then it says:

*But on Sunday morning, when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It had made the first tree beautiful. It had made the second tree strong. And every time people would look at the third tree, they would think of God.*

When I read that story, the glory of God was present with my little family in our own brokenness and God's presence brought peace. Not the sort of peace the world gives, but a deep peace beyond that kind of worldly understanding. You see, sometimes we think that we need to be like that third tree. In the way that the third tree thought that by being the best tree, the biggest, the tallest, the most upright, people would immediately think of God. But her story didn't go like that. It was in her brokenness that God's presence, God's love and God's glory was manifest.

We read this story to our children's church last week. In part this was a follow on to the work that they had done in the week before. You see, we had given them the challenge of going down to the beach and making something out of the driftwood that people could look at and think of God. We told them about the part of scripture in the Palm Sunday narrative that says even if the crowds were to stop shouting praises to Jesus, the stones themselves would cry out. So, we wanted our beach to cry out to God. Well, their work has been visible for all to see in the driftwood cross. As Tim and Hamish tell it, it was as if some angels had literally dropped off a kit-set cross on the beach ready for them to assemble. That cross has stood strong for 3 weeks now, through storm and cyclone, and even a small earthquake. And the cross has not only been visible for our community. As I shared at the start of the service, our whole nation has

seen that cross! When Phil Bengé sent the photo in he sent it to TV1 with a note: he explained that Thursday night (the night of the cyclone) was a night when people were scared and anxious, the cross, he said, particularly given that it was the Easter weekend, could be a sign of comfort and hope to people. And so, it was.

How does something that feels so ugly and cruel and harsh, become something that gives so much comfort and hope?

There is a line in one of our Anglican Great Thanksgiving Liturgies:

*The tree of shame has become the tree of glory*

At the cross, God was fully present, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, present in love to the world. When God is present the glory of God is present. When God's presence is there, God's glory is there. The moment of God's presence in the extreme vulnerability of the crucifixion is a moment in which God's unconditional love is fully present to the truthful and painful, and shameful, reality of humanity. God's love changes everything.

The researcher and writer Brene Brown has written a lot about shame and vulnerability. Her latest book is called *Rising Strong*. I should say that she doesn't write explicitly as a Christian. What she says is to listen to the stories that we tell ourselves, the stories that we tell ourselves particularly at the times when we fall down and keep falling. If we listen we will find in those stories the slide that keeps us falling. What are the alternative stories that we could tell ourselves at that point? Because sometimes we will find that in telling a different story we find a way to rise strong, as she puts it. The image of resurrection is hard to ignore!

So, on that night reading *The Three Trees* to my exhausted family, I began with one story playing through my head. That story was all about my failure as a parent, my failure as a person who sought to be kind and calm, my failure to not perpetuate cultures of violence that I didn't want to perpetuate. But as the story of the three trees began to be told, my story started to change. The story I started to hear inside me was this, "God's grace is sufficient for me. God loves

me just as I am. I find God's presence not when I am most like God, not when I am standing tall, but when I am on my knees and God's presence is dearer to me and more real to me the more real I am". The time of shame, becomes a time of encountering God's loving presence, and its memory has that golden tinge of glory.

You see in resurrection, you can't really skip over that moment of death, that encounter of shame, that encounter of weakness, otherwise resurrection is pointless. I wonder if any of you know the play *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestly?

I studied this play at school and went to see it several times. One production had the most incredible set design, in which the whole action took place in a kind of assembled dolls' house on a vast empty stage. The play takes place in a Victorian dining room with a very well-to-do family. And it begins with the sort of powerful cosmopolitan conversation of privilege, latest inventions, latest consumption and about the unsinkability of the recently launched Titanic! A phone call interrupts the bravado of dialogue and we learn that an inspector is about to call about the death of a young poor woman who has taken her own life.

As the play unfolds, each character in turn gradually reveals a connection to this woman. Their world of affluence, and self-assured privilege begins to crack. They have all done shameful things and all could be responsible for this woman choosing to end her life. At one point in the play when the final person is embroiled in this intrigue and the family are facing themselves with honesty in the painful mirror of reality, the dolls' house set shakes, and the whole house becomes broken and is crooked. But what happens after this moment is interesting. Two of the characters remain in a state of repentant recognition, slumped on the floor. But the others begin to pick themselves up in self justification and gradually return themselves to their sense of privilege. In the stage show I saw, they came out of the dolls' house set and started to re-erect the staging, literally putting the house back together again whilst the dialogue continued. Close your ears if you don't want the spoiler alert... this family come

to a place where they have fully reassured themselves out of any sense of guilt, any sense of blame, and dismissed the worth of this literally poor young woman, to the extent that they deny anything wrong could have happened at all (going so far as to call the morgue in the belief that it is all a hoax). They don't deny the things that they did, but they justify them and in checking the details find that there is, in fact, no young woman at the morgue and so they delightfully assert that this hasn't really happened. So, their world is put back together again, even though they have admitted their wrongdoings, but they re-assert themselves in a world where their doing wrong has no consequences. Then just at this moment when all is well in their world again, the phone rings. It is the same phone call at the beginning of the play, an inspector is about to call about the death of a young woman who has taken her own life. The play ends in silence. The audience is left with the thought, had they genuinely repented would the second phone call have occurred?

Our Diocese talks about a commitment to the last, the lost and the least. We do this because these are biblical categories and you cannot fully follow Jesus unless you listen to what he has to say about those categories and the deathly reality of their existence...the challenge is that until we know that we are part of the last, the lost and the least and part of creating the reality of the last, the lost and the least, we will miss the true presence and glory of God and instead find a shallow, temporal human glory that is a facade. A fake resurrection in a dolls' house world that pretends that death has not really occurred.

This Easter Day, may you truly encounter the glory of God, may you encounter life because you have had the courage to encounter death. Our children are busy making gift vouchers and stapling them to the cross on the beach. They are writing on the cross bar, "Jesus gives" and using stones to write at the foot of the cross, "take what you need". These gift vouchers say things like, peace, healing, forgiveness, direction, courage, joy, strength. Go and meet Jesus at the cross today. Meet God at the point of greatest vulnerability and shame and know that the tree of shame truly has become the tree of glory. May a fresh encounter with God's love change you. And in that meeting, may whatever holds a power of shame over you be taken up in Christ and may God

overshadow you with Divine glory and unconditional love. Repent and believe.  
Kneel sincerely and rise strong.

Amen

