



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 6th October 2024

Readings: *Psalm 8; Hebrews 1.1-4, and 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16*

Human life is a wondrously precious thing.

How unparalleled the gift of a newborn, as a child is anticipated and then welcomed to the family, to one's circle of friends, to the church. Jesus said, 'It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'¹

Yet how precarious life is, too, as shown by more complicated pregnancies, and the complex needs of children on neo-natal units.

Then, there's the other end of life, too. The return to the headlines of assisted dying questions alerts us to how our generation increasingly wants to be in control of everything. If we are going to be so, we need to be as wise as we can about what life is, in whose gift it lies, what 'life in all its fulness'² really means.

Moreover, when nations are at war and willing to take many others' lives as the collateral damage of the conflict, there also needs to be a deep understanding of who has the right to take life away. A recent study highlights the stress for *military personnel on the front line*, but arguably rather more so for those engaged in the contemporary warfare of *drone pilots*. It is said that drone operators – typically hundreds of miles away from the operational zone - can suffer even higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder than typical bomber pilots 'on the scene', as they process remotely the truth that their actions have led to hundreds of deaths.³

How apposite then, that this morning's reading from Hebrews 2 quotes Psalm 8.4, which both asks God, 'what are mortals that you are mindful of them', and suggests in a slight variation from the way Hebrews uses it, we are little lower than God. At times of both birth and death, it's a riveting question. In fact, Hebrews completes the quote from Psalm 8, saying mortals are 'crowned with glory and honour'. Quite a claim.

So, what does 'glory' mean, this thing with which we are crowned? A dictionary definition might assist us. One says glory refers to 'praise, honour, or distinction extended by common consent'; or 'a height of prosperity or achievement.'⁴ It's no surprise that we speak and sing of 'God' and of 'glory' in the same sentence. 'O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth, how glorious is your name!'⁵

That said, if any of that elevated 'glory' talk really applies to us mortals, how do we retain our modesty, our humility, our sense of proportion? Well, when Psalm 8 says we are 'little lower than God' we *could* let the stress fall on the 'lower' more than on the 'little'? As one of my Old Testament tutors might have put it, Psalm 8 makes clear, we are not God, just, merely 'the peak of the non-divine realm'.⁶ Indeed, Hebrews 2 is clear, too: creation is not in subjection to humanity. We're not *over* everything

¹ Mark 10.14

² John 10.10

³ Gray, Peter 2015 *Drone pilots suffer high levels of PTSD* A talk at the 2015 Hay Festival, reported on the website of the University of Birmingham. Available at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news-archive/2015/drone-pilots-suffer-high-levels-of-ptsd#:~:text=Peter%20Gray%20%2D%20aviation%20expert%20and,disorder%20than%20typical%20bomber%20pilot>. Accessed 5th October 2024

'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is traditionally depicted as a result of coming face-to-face with trauma, and many people associate PTSD with the idea of soldiers on the front line, having flashbacks to their time on the battlefield. However, Dr. Peter Gray - aviation expert and director of War Studies at the University of Birmingham - gave a talk at the recent Hay Festival in which he discussed issues surrounding PTSD and drone operators. According to him, drone operators can suffer higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder than typical bomber pilots.'

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glory>

⁵ John Bell 1949-, from the hymn *O Lord, our Lord*, a version of Psalm 8 - CH4 5.coda

⁶ Curtis, Adrian 2004 *Psalms* – in the *Epworth Commentaries* series Peterborough: Epworth page 17

else. Its writer is adamant: only Jesus is crowned with ultimate glory and honour; Jesus who is God's well-beloved child,⁷ in whom the fullness of God dwells,⁸ and who bears 'glory as of the only Son from the Father'.⁹ And we all know that even Jesus is crowned with glory not through majesty and excess bling, less still by tyranny or despotism, but by going to the cross - as Hebrews expresses it, 'he is crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, which by the grace of God he tasted for everyone.'¹⁰

It seems, then, that mortals' true glory is in the way they point to the *ultimate glory* of God, as God is in Jesus – that is, in the way that we glorify God by our lives. Now, to glorify something is to make it glorious (or to give it glory) by bestowing honour, praise, or admiration. So, we might say Christians glorify God as they point away from themselves to God and make the reputation of God shine brightly in the world today – a world that often seeks to ignore or to shroud God's name. How, then, might you and I do some glorifying of God, whose glory is in that dying and undying love? Because, you see, with that understanding, we could regard our high estate as less about being a god-like status, and more about being a God-serving station. As I see things, there is no greater glory that we could have than to be serving the one whose fingers fashioned all that is, even, says Psalm 8, the moon and stars?¹¹

Taking that seriously, I want to make two suggestions. First, that we can glorify God in our *intimate relationships*, and secondly, that we can glorify God through our *role in the community*.

Mark's interpretation of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce no longer sums up how many very devout people regard marriage and divorce. We certainly hold marriage in the highest possible regard, above all as a revelation of the love of God. Indeed, here are words I say at almost every wedding service I conduct, 'Most precious of all, a marriage is a symbol to its partners of God's covenant love for them, as they see it reflected in each other's commitment and faithfulness, tenderness and grace.'¹² Yet, today, even as many of us see the ending of a marriage in divorce as profoundly sad, we do not see it is definitively wrong. Just as intimate relationships - and particularly marriage - are not to be entered upon lightly, they are not to be withdrawn from lightly, either. Divorcing is, after all, far harder to achieve than marrying, and being divorced can be hard to endure, not least if others like children are deeply affected. But, and this is a significant but, when a marriage is not glorifying God – when the partners no longer find it to be a symbol to one another of God's covenant love for them, and maybe quite the opposite (as with some of those young Bangladeshi brides of whom Owen spoke) - might divorcing not be the token of just how seriously we are taking marriage? Marriage is not a sentence for enduring each other's ire, but like a sacrament for enjoying God's superabundant goodness and grace. Divorce is to be entered upon no more lightly than is marriage, but if it enables a return to encountering the glory of God's love in all its beauty, and of life in all its fulness, I for one am persuaded that divorce can be appropriate, and enable us to remain within the gaze and grace of God.

And the other way I would like to suggest that we can glorify God is through our engagement with those in the community who are not asking God 'what are mortals that you are mindful of them?', but rather are pleading with God, 'we are mortals, are you mindful of us?' *Commitment for Life* is the United Reformed Church's instrument for working in partnership with justice-seeking agencies dedicated to ensuring all people know the dignity God intends for everyone, let alone glory and a crown. It's to give the truth to the Psalm's implication that God is mindful of us when we are, in one poet's words, 'lingering at the edge of a broken heart, striking relentlessly against the flint of hard will'.¹³

As you have heard, Downing Place Church's *Commitment for Life* companions are in Bangladesh – though there are also opportunities for similar focus upon Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory,

⁷ Matthew 3.17; Mark 1.11; Luke 3.22

⁸ Colossians 2.9f

⁹ John 1.14

¹⁰ Hebrews 2.9

¹¹ Psalm 8.3

¹² Statement on the Purpose of Marriage - N. P. Uden

¹³ Harjo, Joy (1951-) United States of America Poet Laureate 2019-22. From the poem, *Emergence* in the collection, *Map to the Next World: poems and tales* W. W. Norton 2000

and upon Zimbabwe. As students return to our own city's streets, correspondents from Bangladesh tell us of a relevant situation there, saying, and I quote:

'Bangladesh has experienced unprecedented levels of student protest, possibly the worst in living memory. Over 100 people have died. What started as peaceful protests on university campuses, transformed into nationwide unrest. The government imposed a massive communications blackout, shutting down the internet and phone services. University students were protesting a quota system for government jobs. A third of public sector jobs are reserved for the relatives of veterans from the war for independence in 1971. Students have argued that the system is discriminatory. Most people in the country agree.'¹⁴ End quote.

Support on such situations typifies *Commitment for Life's* work. What a privilege and joy to contribute to others knowing something of the enriched personhood that comes when people show you that charity and justice which – like marriage does to spouses – intimates the glory of God, and assures them that they are little lower than God themselves.

As we honour and safeguard the place of children and students in our lives and in our world, as we contemplate a theologically profound approach to assisted dying, and as we measure the pros and cons of war, will we not do well to include consideration of this: are our actions towards one another distinguished by the way they reveal the glory of God that we see in Jesus Christ, which is in his dying and undying love, offered that we and all creation might have life, and have it more abundantly? Please God, that it is so.

I must ask, 'Why do you care?

Why love humanity?

And why keep every mortal name
fixed in your memory?

Yet such as us you made and meant
just less than gods to be;
with honour and with glory, Lord,
you crowned humanity.¹⁵

We stand to sing Psalm 8 in the version by John Bell.

N. P. Uden, 6th October 2024

¹⁴ Commitment for Life's *Moving Story* from Bangladesh for September to October 2024 Available at <https://urc.org.uk/your-church/church-local-and-global/commitment-for-life/bangladesh/> Accessed 5th October 2024

¹⁵ John Bell 1949- from his version of Psalm 8, O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth
how glorious is your name CH4 5.2.5-3.4