

## A STRANGE GLORY

John 12:20–36; 13:1–38; 1 John 3:11–24

The selection of verses in the Scripture Union syllabus for this Sunday covers 17 verses from John chapter 12, 38 verses from chapter 13 and 14 verses from the third chapter of 1 John. That's 69 verses altogether. I don't think we're going to cover that amount in any detail this morning and so we're going to be selective.

The passages from John's Gospel fall into two categories. Chapter 12 contains the climax of Jesus' public ministry. The setting is Jerusalem where a crowd has gathered for the Feast of Passover. Chapter 13 is more intimate. The setting is an upper room where Jesus was meeting his disciples for the last time before his arrest and trial.

Two years ago we looked at this key passage in John chapter 13. I won't quiz you to see how much you remember but let me refresh your memories. The main themes are love, service, sacrifice, resistance and betrayal. What a contrast between the strength of Jesus and the weakness of his followers: on his part love, service and sacrifice, on theirs, resistance and betrayal.

It's always disheartening when we look to the followers of Jesus and they let us down. They don't show the love of Jesus. They don't serve like Jesus. They won't sacrifice as Jesus did. It's so discouraging when we look to the followers of Jesus with great expectations and find only a refusal to accept his way and a betrayal of all he stands for.

I confess that I have been disappointed and discouraged and wondered what it was all about, but something I read many years ago has helped me. It's this. We must learn to set our course by the stars and not by the lights of every passing ship. In other words we must keep our eyes on Jesus and not be distracted if his followers let us down, and indeed let him down. There's something else we should think about.

There was an occasion when Jesus was besieged by a group of irate Jews. They wanted to know what he would do about a woman whose conduct was a scandal. She had been caught in the act of adultery and the punishment in the law was death by stoning. Jesus did nothing. He just wrote on the ground. But they wouldn't let it go. Finally Jesus said, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' One by one they walked away till only he was left with the woman.

Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. When Christians let you down look to Jesus. At the same time look into your own heart, examine your own life. It could just be that what you're seeing is a speck of dust in your brother's eye while all the time there's a plank in your own.

Looking at others can be so discouraging. Looking at ourselves, if we're honest, can be even more discouraging. We need to look to Jesus. Let's think again about his love.

'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.' He never stopped loving them and he showed them the full extent of his love. That love was expressed in humble service. It was mealtime and the air was filled with the not so sweet aroma of sweaty feet. Where was the servant to wash everyone's feet? It was so embarrassing, so unpleasant.

Finally Jesus got up, not to summon a servant or to order one of the disciples to do it, but to dress down like a servant, wrap a towel around him, and wash their feet himself. Love means lowly service. Jesus said, 'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.'

This is how Paul put it (Philippians 2:5–7). 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'

For Jesus the ultimate act of service was to give himself as a sacrifice on the cross for us. Paul goes on (verses 7 and 8), 'Being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient, even to death — and that, death on a cross!'

Judas and Peter both failed Jesus big time. Judas hanged himself in remorse. For him there was no way back. But Peter didn't take that route. I want you to notice how Jesus dealt with his failure.

When the angelic messenger sent word on the morning of Easter Day that Jesus wanted to see the disciples again, he said, 'Tell his disciples and Peter.' But when Jesus appeared to the disciples that evening he didn't single Peter out. A week later Jesus appeared again and he did single someone out but it wasn't Peter. He singled out Thomas, but not Peter.

It was not till the disciples had gone back up north to Galilee and Peter had led them on that eventful fishing trip that Jesus confronted him. And what did he say? Did he say, 'Why can't you be like Judas and just do the decent thing?' Did he say, 'You're as much use as a chocolate teapot. What are you going to do about it?' No. This is what he said. 'Do you love me?'

And when Peter said yes, Jesus said, in effect, 'Then serve me.' Feed my lambs. Look after my sheep. Feed my sheep.

And then he indicated where that service would one day lead – to the ultimate sacrifice (John 21:18, 19). 'I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

What was the way back for Peter? It was to follow Jesus: to follow him in love, in service and in sacrifice. Peter would one day die a painful death but that painful death was not a punishment. It was a privilege, following Jesus in death as he had done in life.

I find it fascinating that at this point Peter turned to the disciple for whom Jesus had a special affection and said, 'Lord, what about him?' And Jesus said, 'Never mind about him. You just concentrate on following me.'

Today you may be discouraged because of the failings of other people. What about him? What about her? You may be discouraged through your own failures. But for you, as for Peter, the answer is to look away to Jesus and to follow him in love, in service and in sacrifice.

Now for a moment or two I want us to think about that other context, the climax of Jesus' public ministry, what he said to the crowds. Jesus highlighted the important issues in a series of contrasts: life and death, love and hate, time and eternity, light and darkness.

### **Life and death**

Throughout John's Gospel we keep reading of Jesus that his time, his hour, had not yet come. But now Jesus was saying, 'The hour has come,' the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified, and immediately he associated that hour with his death.

John 12 verse 24: 'I tell you the truth, 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.' In verse 32 Jesus said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' John's comment is, 'He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.'

Jesus embraced death because it was only through his death that sinners would receive life. Even the perfect life of Jesus would not have saved us. Like a single seed falling to the ground it was his death that saved us. It was his death that produced a harvest of saved souls. It was when he was lifted up on the cross that he drew all men to himself.

### **Love and hate**

That led Jesus to a further contrast: love and hate. Verse 25: 'The one who loves his life will lose it, while the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' Jesus is using deliberately dramatic language to make his point. He's not talking about self-image or self-harm here.

The person who loves his life in this world is the selfish person, the one who likes other people to serve him, the one who draws the line at making sacrifices. The person who hates his life is the one who puts other people first, who considers it a privilege to serve them, who is willing to make sacrifices for their benefit. Now here's the ultimate outcome. The one who loves his life will lose it, while the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

### **Time and eternity**

Here's the third contrast to consider: time and eternity, this world and eternal life. For Jesus himself these issues had to be faced. Verses 27, 28: 'Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'

John says, 'Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."' Here is a strange thing. The hour to which Jesus had come, the hour of his death, was the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified and for God to be glorified through him. What a strange glory. Crucifixion was a shameful death, reserved for the worst criminals and rebels. It was a cruel end. There was nothing attractive about the cross. Its whole purpose was to act as a deterrent, and failing that, the worst kind of punishment.

For Jesus, death was the ultimate means of glorifying his Father by doing his will. For Peter it was to be the same. "'When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.'" Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would *glorify* God.'

### **Light and darkness**

The final contrast which Jesus put to the people was the contrast between light and darkness. Verses 35 and 36: 'Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light."'

Verse 46: 'I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.'

Are you in the inner circle of Christ's followers or are you part of the crowd, on the fringe? If you're on the outside looking in then here are some challenges for you to face. Are you living for this life alone or for the next? Are you living for time or for eternity? Are you living for your own comfort and pleasure or to please God? Are you living in the darkness or in the light? Are you lost in the crowd or are you following Jesus?