

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Proper 29B, Oct 18, 2015  
Hebrews 5:1-10**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Irenaeus of Lyon was one of the early church fathers who lived and worked in the late second century with his most known work, "Against Heresies" written around the years 175-185. He was part of the early generations of faithful thinkers who struggled to work out what Jesus' life, death and resurrection meant and to determine what would eventually be deemed orthodoxy and what was considered heresy. The primary heresy against which Irenaeus wrote was that of gnosticism. In a nutshell, gnosticism is the belief that matter is evil. It significantly impacts core Christian theology because if matter is evil then Jesus could not have been both fully God and fully human. In this way of thinking, to be God, Jesus had to only appear human, so that Jesus' humanity was merely an illusion.

Irenaeus, however, presented an opposing view. Instead of vilifying matter, he wrote about the glory of God contained within matter... within the created world, including human beings. In the fourth book of "Against Heresies," Irenaeus wrote: "The glory of God gives life; those who see God receive life. For this reason God, who cannot be grasped, comprehended or seen, allows himself to be seen, comprehended and grasped by men, that he may give life to those who see and receive him. It is impossible to live without life, and the actualization of life comes from participation in God, while participation in God is to see God and enjoy his goodness... For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God."

Amongst the lengthy work, it is this last phrase that has become the most known of Irenaeus, and the most quoted, often with a contemporary riff: "The glory of God is [every person, or even] all of creation fully alive." It isn't exactly what Irenaeus wrote, but it does seem like a faithful development of his ideas. It's a great quote because of how it highlights the priceless worth of the created world, including humanity, as fundamental and inseparable from our understanding of the glory of God. And it includes the flip side of the fullness of life found in beholding, in seeing, God. It is a beautiful idea but more, contained within it is both the freedom and challenge to each of us to discover and live into the abundance and glory of the fullness of our life, as a constituent aspect of the glory of God.

We hear something about the glory of God in all our readings this morning, though in very different ways. In the passage from Job we hear the first verses of God's response to Job, after 37 chapters of Job's prayer and conversation with friends about God's silence in the midst of tragedy. Here in chapter 38, God finally answers Job "out of the whirlwind," and we definitely get the sense of God's transcendent and powerful glory in creation: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Psalm 104 likewise describes God's glory in creation, though in a much less frightening tone: "O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent..." and so it goes on in a beautiful, poetic description of God's creative work. In both passages, the writers take a grand view of God as creator of the cosmos and the creation as reflective of God's great glory.

Our New Testament readings offer a much more human-sized view of God's glory. The desire expressed to Jesus by James and John: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," might be comical if its meaning wasn't so serious. It's hardly the first time Jesus' disciples have asked to be honoured in Mark's Gospel and yet still they haven't understood Jesus' teaching about the upside world of the Kingdom of God. Instead, the disciples cling to their version of glory, their desire to receive honour and power, and so they (and we!) hear again Jesus' call to self-giving and service.

The passage from Hebrews is perhaps the most intriguing in how it deals with God's glory because of how it is put in the hands of humans: "Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God..." It is, admittedly, a bit of a riff to consider the "things pertaining to God" as similar, if not synonymous, with "the glory of God," but perhaps you'll grant me some intellectual leeway... if only because of how compelling the distance is between God's response to Job: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" and putting humans in charge of things pertaining to God. It is a theological leap as great as the cosmos itself!

In Hebrews, the humans put in charge of the "things pertaining to God" are named high priests. The image that most readily springs to mind with this description is likely of an institutional office within an established church. But in the book "Living on the Border of the Holy," scholar and pastor William Countryman offers a much broader and a much more evocative description: "By 'priest'," Countryman writes, "I mean any person who lives in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence, where the everyday experience of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the HOLY - and not only lives there but comes to the aid of others who are living there... The border where we encounter the HOLY is not just at the edge of our existence but, even more truly, at its centre..." (xi) This most fundamental priesthood of mutual ministry and support in the mysterious and exhilarating borderlands of life, Countryman goes on to explore, belongs to all of humanity.

This "priesthood of humanity" involves introducing others to *arcana* – to hidden things or secrets. He writes: "Everyone is a priest of a mystery that someone else does not know: how to construct a budget, how to maneuver through the politics of the workplace, how to roast a turkey, how to win the affections of the girl or boy to whom one is attracted. The experience is so common that much of the time we do not notice it at all. We are all constantly serving others as priests of mysteries known to us and not to them. And we are constantly being served by those who know what we do not." (4) In other words, Countryman argues that each of us, by virtue of being human, knows something of God's glory that is completely unique. And so I think Countryman would agree with Irenaeus that "the glory of God is all creation fully alive; and [that] life consists in beholding God." No one piece of creation reflects the fullness of God's glory and yet each and every piece, including each one of us, contains a part. Each one of us is responsible for our own little part of God's glory and grabbing hold of our role as priests to one another means sharing our part of the glory of God.

Last Sunday, Gordon shared something of the piece of the God's glory, the mystery of life, about which he came to have some understanding. Yesterday morning, Walt shared another piece of God's glory revealed to him with his love of bluebirds. You often hear from me about those things that matter to me... ideas and activities that cause me to come alive. What piece of

God's glory do you carry? What unique understanding of the ways of God have you developed? What is the activity or the idea, or where is the place, or when is the time that you feel most fully alive? I may not know your particular answer, but I do know that the answer is not "nothing." I know that God has given you some kind of special revelation, some deep passion, and I know that our community is strengthened when you're willing to share it with the rest of us. Of course, that means that we're also strengthened by seeking out what others have to offer... what a newcomer experiences in our worship... what a stranger sees in our community... how our children imagine God... the wisdom gained through trials and suffering.

According to Countryman, "The priesthood of the Christian people is the priesthood of all humanity, interpreted and formed by the priesthood of Jesus." (63) We hear something of this priesthood described in our passage from Hebrews this morning, described in terms of both death and resurrection: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death..." The glory of God, it turned out for Jesus, came in his willingness to suffer for the sake of others, in his courage and obedience to take his completely human experience before God with loud cries and tears in prayer, and finally in the on-going life he has because of God's eternal commitment to life through resurrection. We live out our priesthood as Christian people not so much in trying to copy what Jesus did, but rather in praying that [quote] "what we learn from Jesus will shape us so that we can live responsibly and generously, in our own day and place, as Jesus did in his. This life is lived in the shadow of death, but also in the confident hope of resurrection." (77)

Ultimately, things pertaining to God, God's glory, is anything and everything that has to do with life. The glory of God is all creation fully alive and life consists in beholding God everywhere and anywhere life is found. May we know this glory ever more richly and more abundantly, as we seek to live life to its fullest, each and every day. May we each exercise our unique priesthood by sharing with others our unique piece of the mystery that is God. And may our lives be enriched by seeking the knowledge and experience of God's glory held by others around us.