

# THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

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If you were to choose one word to describe the Church, which would it be? I would choose the word 'glorious'. I wonder if that describes your experience of the Church.

The concept of glory can help us plot a route through the whole Bible. From beginning to end, the people of God are on a journey. It's a journey towards the Glory. You can always tell where they are on this journey, depending on where they are in relation to the Glory. Sometimes they are very close to the Glory and sometimes they are a long way away.

There seems to be a growing consensus amongst biblical scholars that the very first readers of the creation accounts of the book of Genesis would have seen in them all sorts of symbolism related to temples. The suggestion is that, in creating the world, God was building a temple - the ultimate temple in which his presence would dwell. At the heart of this temple, he made an inner sanctuary, a holy of holies, called the Garden of Eden, in which human beings could encounter and enjoy the very presence of God himself.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the presence of God is referred to as 'the Glory' ('Shekinah' in Hebrew). The Fall tells the story of how human beings were shut out from the presence of God after sin entered the world and really the rest of the Bible tells the story of God's work to make it possible for us

to dwell in his presence again, to enter into, encounter and enjoy his glory. As the ancient Hebrews wandered in the wilderness following their escape from Egypt, God commanded Moses to make a tabernacle which they would carry around with them as the place where God's glory would dwell in their midst. There was a wonderful moment when Moses set up the tabernacle just as God had commanded him 'and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle'; he could not even enter because the tabernacle was so filled with the Lord's glory (Exodus 40:34-35).

It was this glory that guided them on their journey. If the cloud of glory rose up from the tabernacle and moved on, they broke camp and followed it until it came to rest, and there they stayed until it moved on again - a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was now possible, at least for one person, to enter again into the glory of the presence of God. Moses would go into the tabernacle and speak with God face to face as a man would speak to his friend. It was such a powerful glorious experience that, when he came out, Moses' face was so radiant with glory that the people could not bear to look at him and he had to wear a veil.

Their journey finally came to an end as they reached the Promised Land. One day, King David realised that, although he was living in a grand palace, God's presence was still dwelling in the tabernacle, a meagre tent. He set his

heart on building a temple for the Lord, though in the end it was to be his son, King Solomon, who would build it. Again, there's a wonderful description of the day the building of the temple was finally completed and Solomon dedicated it:

*'When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever"' (2 Chronicles 7:1-3).*

The journey had brought them very close to the glory again. They may not all have been able to enter it, as they would have liked to have done and as had been the case in the good old days of the Garden of Eden, but at least God was there, in all his glory, dwelling in their midst, and at least the priests could enter in as their representatives.

However, God warned them that, if they were disobedient to him, his glory would depart and they would be carried off into exile, which is exactly what happened. Ezekiel, the prophet, saw what was really going on in a terrifying vision: 'the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold

of the [temple] and stopped over the cherubim. The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth' (Ezekiel 10:18-19a). The glory of the Lord's presence was carried away.

The glory had departed. They ended up a long way from home in exile. The temple was destroyed. They sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept, longing to return home and longing for the glory of the Lord's presence to return to them.

Eventually they did return in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra and they rebuilt the temple. There was another wonderful moment as they laid the foundation stone of the new temple. They sang the same songs as they had when King Solomon originally dedicated the first temple and there was the sound of great rejoicing, but there was another sound as well. The sound of rejoicing mingled with the sound of weeping. The older people wept because they could remember the first temple and this second temple was nothing like it, because the glory of the Lord's presence had not returned.

God did, however, promise that his presence would one day return and the rest of the Old Testament tells the story of those promises and the people's longing for their fulfilment. The promises were glorious - not only a temple, but the whole earth would one day be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

Many years they longed and waited, and still God promised, in the closing pages of the Old Testament: 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts' (Malachi 3:1).

They waited and waited. Then, one day, two parents climbed the steps of the temple, carrying their new-born baby in their arms. At the temple door, they were met by an old man named Simeon, who had been waiting just as everyone had been waiting. He took the baby in his arms and, praising God, said (in the familiar translation of the Book of Common Prayer):

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared in the sight of all people; to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the Glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32).*

Welcoming that baby to the temple, Simeon described him as the glory of God's people Israel. Simeon saw it! The glory was returning. As John wrote in his gospel: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory as of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

God was finally dwelling in the midst of his people again. It looked nothing like they expected it to look. They had expected some kind of radiant cloud to fill the temple, yet now the glory was outside the building, amongst the people.

Jesus' first disciples recognised in him what they had all been desperately waiting and longing for: God had returned to his people, to reign as their King once more. In Jesus they encountered the glorious presence of God in their midst and they were surrounded by the signs of his presence: the poor were receiving good news, those held captive were set free, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the lame walked, the dead were raised.

His death and resurrection and ascension were central to it all. His shameful hanging on the cross was his supreme moment of glory. It was a glory that broke out from the darkness of the tomb and ascended to the highest place over all creation.

Then another remarkable event took place. On the Day of Pentecost, God poured out his Holy Spirit upon the Church, just as Jesus promised he would. Those very same disciples suddenly realised that they were experiencing the very same glorious presence of God within their new Spirit-filled community, just as they had done in Jesus. Through that new Spirit-filled community, Jesus was continuing his ministry on earth. Empowered by the Spirit, those followers of Jesus discovered that they were able to do in the name of Jesus what Jesus himself had done.

That's what it means to be the Church! That's why the Church exists and that's what the Church exists for. That's why the Church is glorious. Yes, of course, we are all weak human beings who continue to fall short of the glory of God and therefore the Church at the moment will always be less than it could be, but the Church is a divine institution, established by God, as the place where his glory dwells, continuing the ministry of Jesus on earth.

What word would you use to describe the Church. I would choose the word 'Glorious'!

Amazingly, that's also what it means to be a Christian. 'Do you not know,' wrote the Apostle Paul, 'that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?' (1 Corinthians 6:19). You were created for glory too, to be a temple in which God's glorious presence dwells. I wonder if 'glorious' would be the word which would come to mind if you were to think about the fellow Christians you know. Perhaps it should be!

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