

IN HUMBLE MAJESTY

Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-16

One of the first parades I remember was in late February 1962. I was eight years old and living outside Washington, D.C. My father and I drove into the city and found a spot to stand along Pennsylvania Avenue. We were there to see my boyhood hero, John Glenn. Just days earlier Glenn had become the first American to orbit the earth. President Kennedy had escorted him from Cape Canaveral to the nation's capital, and now he along with the other Mercury 7 astronauts was being honored with a parade from the White House to the Capitol where a joint meeting of Congress was waiting to pay them tribute. I still remember the thrill of seeing those heroes drive by accompanied by the Vice President of the United States. They symbolized all that was good and promising, all that was possible, not just for America but for the entire human race. No longer were we bound by the confines of this planet. The stars were within our reach. What a marvelous day that was to be eight years old.

We've accomplished a lot in the decades since that parade. Where we invested effort, determination and ingenuity, we've made remarkable progress. We met Kennedy's challenge to put a man on the moon by the end of that decade. We've sent spacecraft beyond the reaches of the solar system. We live longer. Our children are healthier. We've made progress in civil rights and women's equality. But there are some things that haven't changed, some things that no amount of energy or grit or resolve can alter.

We've figured out how to break free from the limits of the earth, but we're still bound by the limits of our humanity. One of the first things you realize when you're a child is that you have limits. That's what makes the terrible twos so terrible. Children discover that the world won't accommodate their every desire on demand, and it makes them furious. The older you get, the more aware you are of your limits. When I was sixteen I finally admitted to myself that I would never be first chair trumpet as long as Bob and Manuel were in the high school band. By the time you're middle aged, you know there are certain things you dreamed of doing that you probably won't do. One

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characteristic of wisdom is recognizing our limits and learning how to live fully within them.

Neither have we figured out how to stop things from changing. The car that made us feel so up-to-date when we bought it new starts to look drab and worn. The fresh new-car smell gives way to that tired aroma of worn upholstery. The best friend with whom you share everything moves away. Children grow up. You long to go back to those days when they bugged you to play their games, games that seemed so trivial compared to the important things you had to do. Now they have more important things to do, and you want them back. Life is transient. You can't hold on to anything and keep it the same, no matter how hard you try.

And we haven't figured out how to keep from dying. We can extend life and, in many ways, make it better, but it still ends. Along with all the other animals, we have an instinctive aversion to death and an innate desire to survive. But unlike other creatures, we are aware of our own death. It casts a shadow over life. We know that no matter what we do our days will one day come to an end.¹

Today we remember another parade, one that took place 2000 years ago. I suspect that the people who lined the parade route into Jerusalem were there for reasons that were similar to the reasons that took Dad and me into Washington D.C. that damp February day in 1962. They were there to catch a glimpse of someone who had done an incredible thing and who held out the promise of things even more amazing.

Jesus had done many remarkable things, but what was creating all the buzz, according to John, was what he did for Lazarus. Lazarus had been dead for four days when Jesus called him out of the tomb. It was clear now that Jesus had God's power on his side. People were counting on him to use that power to restore Israel to the glory it had in the days of David and Solomon. He would throw out the Romans. He

¹ From a talk by Martin E. Marty at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, March 1998.

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would set up a throne on Mt. Zion. It would be glorious; the way Jesus would use his power.

But in the grand scheme of things what the crowds expected from Jesus was the same old thing. The kind of glory they expected from Jesus the conquering hero eventually fades. Other empires rise to power and dominate the world. And not even the most powerful emperor can conquer death.

Jesus was coming with another kind of power, power not even his disciples understood until he had died on the cross. The power Jesus brought is the power that created the universe and breathed life into us. It's the power that never changes through all the changes of our years. It is the power of God's love, the love that gives itself completely to the ones God loves. It is the love that transforms us from the inside out by taking on our limits, our transience and even our death.

If you were to chart the story told in the gospel of John, it would look like a great arc – an inverted parabola. Jesus starts on high with the Father in all the glory and splendor of heaven. He comes down and lives among us, taking on everything that makes us human except our sin. He experiences the limitations of our human bodies. He endures first the hosannas of the Palm Sunday parade and then the derision of the Good Friday mob. Jesus takes on himself everything that is human and carries it to the cross. He is anointed, but his anointing is for death. He wears a purple robe, but it is the cloak of mockery. He is presented to his people, and they reject him. He is lifted up, but it is on a cross. And on that cross, he draws all people to himself.² “He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself... being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 463.

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and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

A while back I had the privilege of giving the blessing at the dedication of a new facility for homeless people in the city where I lived. The ecumenical agency that helps the homeless had acquired a former rehabilitation facility and converted it into apartments. After the ceremony there were punch and cookies, and I was visiting with one of the residents of the men’s floor. He asked if I’d like to see his new home, and I said “Of course.” He took me down the hall of what used to be a nursing home and proudly opened the door of his room. It was a simple place – a small room with a bed, a dresser, two chairs, a tape player and a small TV. Over and over again he said how grateful he was for it. That room – his home – symbolized for him his new life. And he was emphatic that it was because of Jesus. Jesus had reached down to him in the gutter, opened his heart, and invited him to turn his life over to God. He did, and Jesus, working through the ministry of the shelter and the churches that supported it, rescued him from the street.

That’s where real power lies. We can reach for the stars. We can cure diseases. We can improve the quality of life. Thanks be to God for the ability we have to make the world a better place. But only God can change lives from the inside out. God does it by touching the depths of our souls, by coming to us in Christ and redeeming us through his grace. And not only our souls, but all creation will one day be changed by his love that gives and gives and gives until in emptying himself he is exalted in glory. “Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.” Hosanna in the highest!