

The glory of persons

How do we see it?

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Seeing the glory

John's deep motivation for writing his Gospel for us, is that he wants to bear witness to what "we" - he, and others - have seen [John 1.14]. What he has seen he calls the "glory" of Jesus. He describes this glory as the glory of an 'only Son' who came from God the Father, who was full of grace and truth. What this addition implies is that the glory of a person, if it is to be seen at all, requires us to take into account their relations to someone else - in this case the sending Father.

If we, as readers, are to see this glory of the Son, in relation to the Father, we do well to consider things we already know from our own life in relation to others. This will help us to understand how to 'see' glory and what it is that we 'see' there.

The following reflections are designed to enable us to know what we are about in reading this Gospel of the glory of the Son. For the writer's aim will only be realised for us if we see what John saw - and know for sure that we have. I write of my own perceptions, and then apply this to various situations which we read about in the Bible and also in John's Gospel.

When persons meet well

Meeting others can work changes in you. That certainly is what has happened to me. When I try to explain it, I boil it down to what I call 'revelation and response'. I should say right here that I am beginning with 'good experiences' - ones that proceed along the lines that relationships are meant to go. And if you're immediately thinking, "on what basis can this writer know how relationships are meant to go? or "meant by whom?" then you shall have to wait for me to declare myself a little later.

But to establish a common base for our opening ideas, I am sure that such change through meeting others is also true for yourself as well. You must have encountered an outgoing person who, right from the start openly reveals some aspect of themselves without waiting for you. They take the initiative really. That, in itself, can be a bit uncomfortable but if there is an attractiveness to their outgoing nature it makes it a small price to pay.

I am not here describing what some would call an 'extrovert' - a label applied to a person to describe their action, and often compared with another's action that is unlike it, the 'introvert'. No, I am simply dealing with everyday openness to each of us in life.

Self-revelation is unique

A deep truth is contained in the initiative that someone takes to open themselves and speak of those things that are within their heart. The truth is that what is revealed is unique; only they can reveal themselves to others. It is true about yourself as well - only you can reveal you. No one else, apart from your Creator, is in possession of your inner being, only your own spirit knows the deep matters of your person. So, it follows that when a person does speak of deep inner matters they are articulating matters of their own, inner spirit. It is the way with persons, when they reveal, they are doing something that only they can.

This has important implications as we read the Gospel. For when God takes the initiative to reveal himself, this tells us that He is an open Person, so willing to speak of himself and not holding back about showing his inner heart towards us. Further, this will mean that He alone is in the position to reveal Himself. And it follows that, should He choose to reveal Himself through his Son, then that Son must share his very being.

Only He can make such a revelation - only God can reveal God. We can know nothing of God's inner character and person unless He is the source of the revelation and speaks it out in the way that is able to carry the revelation to us in a full and comprehensive way. It will be his speech that explains his actions.

Responding

Now, as you encounter such an open person and the self-revelation they have offered, when they have finished speaking, you are faced with how to respond, based upon how you perceive these offered opening words. For you, yourself, may be a reserved person. Or perhaps you have some genuine puzzlement about their offered revelation. You may be asking yourself, "What do I make of this?" "Is this genuine?" "Why is this person so outgoing?"

That is precisely the issue we face in reading the Gospel. How shall we assess the revelation that is being made? What would encourage us to

know that it is a genuine, inner witness of the heart of God to us. And if this is God speaking to us through his Son, why is He, in Himself, simply so outgoing? And what does He know of our situation that makes it so imperative that we have a revelation of his heart?

Yet, however you answer these questions inwardly, one thing is sure, whether you speak or act in making a response to this self-revelation, something about you will be shown to the other. In your 'response' you too are opening yourself. For a revelation will now be made about you. Your response will convey to the revealer, not only what you understood them to say about themselves in the first place, but also how you have taken it in. In your response something will now be conveyed as to how you have registered it, deep within yourself.

As we read the Gospel, we must expect, in a way that we always expect whenever there is personal interchange, that our own inner heart will be exposed simply as we answer to this astonishing self-made revelation of God. As all conversations indicate, something will be shown about yourself. Don't be put off by this - it is the nature of the case with anyone, even God.

That you have first been addressed and with such openness, means that something has begun between you both. For, if you are to relate at all - and even to ignore the person makes a relational statement - your response will in some way be governed by their opening revelation. The unavoidable nature of the situation goes to deep things which are meant to be taking place between persons. But more of that as we develop our ideas.

Relating

Even if you did not trust what they said, or were not sure how to process it, and if you made a guarded, if polite, response; then they will also know that. Nevertheless, you are still relating. It is tentative to be sure, it is not free yet, but it could become so. We are often defensive with people and have many polite and careful openings with which to begin or respond in a conversation. These opening gambits often pursue a roundabout, and more exhausting, way to the possibility of a deeper relationship to one another.

As we read the Gospel, our own, personal, opening thoughts may be quite guarded. This should not surprise you. It is natural to our own defensive posture with people. It is especially so if the revelation is claiming to come from God Himself,

with whom we may be already very guarded indeed! What I would encourage you about is to keep it polite, right now. For even polite, guarded and tentative exchanges can lead to deep and more meaningful things. Be kind to yourself in these opening days of reading the Gospel.

Mutual exchange has begun

As you speak out your response, face to face with the other person, you will be conveying to them how you have received what they said. There is a connection between the words we utter and our persons. For, if you have received their words as a genuine expression of their heart - their inner self - then you will have conveyed, at the same time, that you have received them. Not just received some ideas, or information about them, both of which are sure; but you will have received them. You have received the very person they have wanted to show to you, for that is what their act of self-revelation means. And now, as a friend of mine would say, this is a 'beautiful thing' which has happened. You have now embarked upon a mutual exchange. You have begun to relate.

This is what it means in the Gospel to receive Jesus [1.14]. It would indicate your own acceptance that the spoken revelation of the heart of God comes through his Son, who is God. To receive his words as true and genuine matter of the heart, to receive his testimony about those things that He knows between his Father and himself, would mean that you are on the way to receiving his Person. Just as you do, daily, with many conversations that you have.

Initiating revealers: passive responders.

In what I have just described so far, there are two persons for us to focus upon. First, there is the open, active person, who, in regards to their action, is the 'initiator'; we shall also call them the 'revealer'. And then, secondly, there is the 'receiver' of the revelation who is at first passive, and then, once they actively answer to the revelation, I call them the 'responder'.

In regards to the second person, sometimes we shall focus upon them as a 'receiver', and so consider their inward processing and what they are registering within - that is, how they understand what is taking place within themselves - once they have heard what has been revealed. At other times, we shall look at them as the 'responder', considering what it is that

they have now answered after their own inward process. This response, of itself, must be processed in turn by the first person once it has been uttered.

The 'between'.

This 'beautiful thing', this relating that has begun, introduces to us a third focus. For something is now happening between the initiator and receiver, or if we think another way, the revealer and the responder. What is this and how shall we think about it? To consider this we continue our description of what is taking place.

After you have made your response, the initial revealer will not ignore your answer. Some initiators do keep venting, but that is not how things are meant to go. No, the initial revealer now makes a 'response to your response'. This assures you that their opening statement was a genuine attempt to engage you, not just a desire to talk about themselves. Recalling what was said about such human exchanges, the initiator is, in turn, drawn by your response. They must now make 'a response to your response'. And as we saw before, this will begin with an inward assessment of how you expressed your own understanding and reception of the first revelation. So the relating goes forward. The first revelation does not need repetition, it is a known thing, and it is remembered and still underlies the whole exchange.

A growing, mutual, free exchange

From here on the responding to one another can change back and forth. Perhaps you are free to reveal something about yourself. You too can take the initiative and may be drawn to open your heart to this person. In which case, you will see how your own revelation is received as well.

From this free exchange of revelations and responses a relationship matures as it deepens between persons. It becomes far more than any one of the responses; they are the moment, the relationship is the accumulation of many responses over time and it states that something deeper has arrived. What soon becomes central is that it really is a receiving of one another. It leads to an ever increasing, free sharing of individual lives with

each other. This sharing of a common life is the beautiful thing that happens between friends who were drawn to one another. It is not too strong to speak of it as a true communion - it is a union of life.

Faith union - the pleasure of shared trust

Such an open revelation and trusting reception of one another began the relationship. Each had faith in what the other said and so in them. Such a state of affairs is truly pleasing and acceptable to each in their own person. Each felt it to be the highest compliment that can be paid to a person. Each registered the exchange as saying, "I am trusted. I have been responded to in a way that receives and accepts my understanding of myself. I am known here as I have revealed myself to be". What we mustn't miss here is that the response generates a registration within the revealer that causes them to come to know something within themselves, about themselves, in regard to this respondent.

Such initial faith between persons is continually maintained in the shared life together. This faith in one another, which began with the very first revelation and the response to that revelation, now comes to mean that every maturing relationship moves 'from faith to faith', - from a trusting at first to trusting some more. It does this in two ways.

Considering the exchanges, it moves from that initial trust to an ever deepening trust; considering the persons, it moves from the faithfulness of the one to the faithfulness of the other. Such a faith union - a mutual trust which receives one another, is the underlying glue of this relationship - it binds together the constant revelations made and the responses to responses which will go on and on.

In this way, faith, understood as mutual trust in each other, becomes the bedrock of a union of life that is freely shared between the persons. As long as this trust is there, their mutually shared life flourishes and affirms each other. But notice that this is the arrival of a third thing that can be thought about as distinct, but not separated from the persons. It is not that the two people lose their own selves in the life together. Here we experience that we have both a union of life while at the same time we also

remain distinctly ourselves. This is the power of mutual trust - there is no loss of our own self even while we can be free for another. We simply are in relation such that we 'have' one another.

Having one another - union of life

This 'having' of a person is dynamic and relational. It is a 'having' quite different from the way we have a purse that we can put in our pocket and think of as a possession which we own; some 'thing' that we have propriety over and can use as we like. No, this 'faith union' means to have one another in a free exchange between us, based upon the trust which is built and sustained through mutual, transparent revelation and response. Such unions are common; to men and women, boys and girls; any human exchange, when conducted on the basis of a mutually received revelation and response ends up in a faith union. Each person, from their own side of the exchange, could say of the other person that they 'have' yet, of course, that is true only as we have one another.

This is so for the Christian who is drawn into a relation which shares the life of God. He or she is not swamped by this. For God's life is the free exchange between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their freedom for each other, while at the same time they remain distinct as persons from each other, constitutes the freedom of God - both to make revelation through each other and to carry out their purposes - both their being and acts reveal themselves in their unity.

It is this Life within the Godhead, that, at creation, He has given to us. This is what it means to be made in his image, to be capable this way of personally relating. So, if He would act to redeem us when we fell into the brokenness that we now relationally know as described above, then a free sharing in God's life 'through Christ' and it is, 'in the Spirit', would never lead to a diminishing or swamping, of ourselves.

Thinking and talking about this

Have you noticed that this relational way of living makes us think and talk in a certain way. For the relationship we have been considering, simply by being what it is, teaches us how we must think about it. This is good

science, to let the thing itself guide us as to how we might think about it; not bringing our own ideas to what is before us. Rather, instead of forcing it into our own mould of thought, we let it speak to us for what it is. This proper scientific attitude keeps us humble in our approach to these deep realities we are learning to understand and to talk about.

So, in thinking about the relating that takes place 'between' us, since we are persons, we must speak about ourselves, and this means each of us is distinct from the other. At the same time, we can say of ourselves that, in respect of our mutual trust in our exchanges, we are one, we are in union. To think about such a union of shared life in a full way, we need speak of this as "two, who are [in life], one". This commits us to thinking about this phenomenon in a 'both/and' way. For we see two things, which seem to us to be either opposites, or mutually seem to exclude one another, and we learn to hold both as true, and true at once. We are not oscillating from the one to the other in some dualistic way of thinking. That is to accept them as two, but makes no expression of the unity they have between them.

Rather, we are found saying that something, or someone, is simultaneously, both "this" and "that". Both themselves as individuals and "one" together. Some people call this a dialectical way of thinking. This is not a fantasy, it is the reality before us, it is the nature of the situation that demands we think this way. It mirrors the way that humble scientists have come to regard, for example, the nature of light since Einstein. On the one hand, it is an energy and satisfies the general wave equation mathematically; on the other hand, it behaves in a way that it has mass. It operates as both mass and energy. Previously such entities as 'mass' and 'energy' were thought to be mutually exclusive. But on letting the thing, as in this example of light, teach us how to think about it we come to think of it as being both one and the other, and at the same time. What is changed is that the phenomenon itself has demanded that we think dialectically.

Personal relationships, with their inherent requirement of mutual trust, such as we are describing, help us to learn who we are. We understand our identity when we are in relation to someone in this 'faith union' way. We really only know ourselves in relation to other persons. We not only discover our own heart in relation to another, we also find that they, if

trusted, have the power to affirm us for who we are in the relation. Affirmation from another is, at the same time, a knowing of myself.

And all this takes time because often what one says, when responded to by the other, will indicate misunderstanding. So 'responses to responses' can require correction and re-statement so that each comes to understand what the other meant, or did not mean. This constant working at shared meaning over many contexts and the struggles of life is part of the relational growth that happens between persons in a trusting union.

Attitudes - stances towards each other

In a maturing relationship, it is not only the meaning of the words that give rise to misunderstandings that must be resolved. Misunderstandings also arise from the attitudes of heart adopted one to another as well. It is these attitudes of our inner-self that accompany, and so can colour, our words and actions. This is a further complication to speech and action that occurs between persons.

A third party, observing the relational exchange we have been outlining, will note externally the attitudes and positions being adopted towards one another. This third person will register what is taking place between them. Inwardly, of course, the persons themselves will be aware of their attitudes.

One thing that will be externally obvious to this third party will be an honouring of the one by the other. And further, whether such honour is freely offered and accepted. Any domination shown, leading to the subservience of the other, would imply a flawed relationship. But if there is a voluntary submission, freely extended; and this submission is received by the other without embarrassment, as being something obviously acceptable and appropriate, then our observer has chanced upon something very beautiful indeed!

Honouring another conveys glory

This sort of voluntary, loving honouring of another, is initially offered from the side of, what I call, the honourer. When received, equally freely, then

the honour shown displays the glory of the honoured party. In the case of friends who see each other as equals, such honouring is mutual and implies great respect. By relating this way, they glorify one another.

This is what we see in God's own life. For the three Persons of the Trinity, who are One in being and life together, each honours the other and so manifests the glory of the other. Being equal and distinct as to their Persons, yet each can freely submit one to the other in the matters of their shared life and purposes.

If we learn to see the glory of persons in the way we have been thinking about, then we are in a position to read the Gospel and understand what the glory is that we are looking for and where to look for it.

As we read the Gospel, we come across such statements by our writer, John, that "we have beheld his glory, glory as of an only Son, begotten of the Father" [John 1.14]. Here then, we are directed to the Father-Son relationship in all its intimacy [for the Son is said to be 'in the bosom of the Father' John 1.18b]. The way of their relating to one another will demonstrate the glory each one 'has' as they 'have' each other in the relationship.

The freely offered obedience of the Son to the Father, and his willingness to receive all that the Father 'shows' to him that He is doing [John 5.19-23] are actions of the Son that honour the Father.

In turn, that the Father uniquely shows to the Son what He, the Father is doing. He then gives him authority to carry out such things. This shows to us, the readers of the Gospel, the glory of the Son.

In the opening Forward to the Gospel [John 1.1-18] we learn that the pre-existent Word of God, who is with God and is God, and has made all things and is the life and light of men and women, takes flesh like ours [1.14]. Then, as we read of Jesus of Nazareth, we shall think of him as this very Word of God who came, historically, after John the Baptist and yet existed before him [John 1.30]. Nor will it surprise us that Jesus, just before his coming to the Father by dying, rising and ascending, can speak of the glory which he had with the Father 'before the world was made' [John 17.5,24].

'Givens' - set relationships

Up to this point, we have been considering mutually honouring relationships between equals. Yet, there are relationships which derive their honouring of another not from a simple free choice of the honourer, as

among friends, but from a 'set' relation which has been decided by the Author of all relationships.

These derivative relationships, those set by God's own order, are what I call "given" relations. We do choose our friends - even if that choice includes the element of being drawn to them by their attractiveness. If this is how it is between friends, it is not so for our 'relatives'; they are 'givens'. We did not choose our parents, and the associated aunts, uncles and cousins etc. Neither did we choose our monarch, or an authorised leader of a nation, or the magistrate or any of our public figures who carry authority. These folks sort of 'arrive' in our place of life as already set for us.

For these given relations then, there is a 'relational glory' due to them that is established before we relate. Towards these people there is an honour that should be freely offered from the heart because God Himself, as already honoured for Who He is as the Creator, is the one who sets all things and such persons in relation to one another. If He has set these persons to be honoured then, because we honour Him, we will honour them. It is our joy to yield to his order. And notice, it is quite independent of the sort of person they are. We see this sort of thing whenever we look at the attitudes offered to a monarch or some other governing figure; also the more familiar figures found in family, in work, in teams, in so many walks of life.

The glory of a thing, be it rock or a tree, consists in its own beauty, and its context, as made by the creator. It is glorious in its manifestation to our senses and we are capable of registering this order and glory. We recognise the work of the Creator; we marvel at His way of doing things. In the beauty of the natural order around us we recognise the wonder of God's ways - aware that we are thinking his thoughts after him.

The glory of a king is not like that of a rock or any 'thing'. It is not to be found by looking at the king himself, his clothes, the outward pomp of his court or the accoutrements that surround him. Rather, his glory is seen in the relating that takes place between him and his subjects; for they, in their way of relating to him are able to openly demonstrate his glory. Simply because they have been placed in relation to him they can, and must, offer freely from the heart that which is his due. In their relating to

him they can therefore glorify him.

Conversely, if they they operate out of a self-centred elevation of themselves, then they will treat him as their equal; this is to dishonour him. They can, in this way, rob him of his glory. For they have a unique, 'given' relation to him. They are the only ones who are able, through their set relational position, to glorify him through their offer of their free, voluntary submission. Their denial of their submission does not change the reality of the given relation, but it robs it of its proper manifestation. Similarly, the glory of the teacher is not found in the way she dresses, how she carries herself, or by any external beauty she possesses, but is found by observing her pupils. Their obedience, their interest in what she says, their readiness to respond to learn from her; all these actions demonstrates her glory. They honour her. Similarly, the glory of the parents is found by watching their children.

Summary so far

So we can now state,

[1] that for persons, glory is relational. It is an honouring that takes place between persons.

[2] It may be derived from a 'given' relation or it may be established through a freely entered, trusting and self-revealing friendship.

[3] By attitudes taken and ways of relating, glory may be also be observed by a third party. It is an open secret of any relationship between persons.

[4] By the way others relate to a person, glory may be robbed from those to whom it is due, or it may be openly shown. If shown, then the 'giver' of that relation is also honoured.

Righteousness in relations

Just as a third party sees the outward actions and attitudes, there are also inner, secret matters that are inwardly known by each party in the relationship. Glory is registered both by the glorified person and also by the one who glorifies them through the way they relate.

As we have already shown, when someone is trusted this is absolutely

acceptable and a pleasure to them, because they think it a right way for their hearer to relate to what they have said and done - their words and works. So, we can say that the responsive trust of another is an acceptance by them of how they see themselves in relation to the trusted one.

The 'trusted' receives this as the right way of relating to him; it is deeply satisfying. It is, after all, to be taken for who he has shown himself to be. Each of us is deeply satisfied inwardly when we are received this way. The 'truster', being drawn by the revealed trustworthiness of the other, freely offers his trust as a right way for him to relate. This mutual exchange is righteousness expressed in relation. The appropriate receiving of each other is right and true to what has been revealed and received. The relationship is going the way that God intended for our life to be true and rich together.

This is what passed between Abraham and the Lord when he trusted what the Lord said to him [Genesis 12.1-3,4]. "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness [Genesis 15.6; Romans 4.3]. The Lord signalled to him, by clearly saying so, that his trust was just the right way to respond to what God had promised him. It was this relational understanding that was the bedrock of the exchange.

We also see it when Abraham obeys God and offers up Isaac at the command of the Lord. Then the Lord says that He "knows" that Abraham fears, reveres Him [Genesis 22.12]. It is not that the Lord was ignorant of a fact here. This is a relational statement from the Lord's side of the mutual exchange. It tells of what God has registered in Himself concerning Abraham.

Joy - in relating

For the one who responds with trust to the revelation made, there is an inner joy registered in this 'truster'. Joy is the inner thrill of knowing one has done what was required. To the 'truster' this is the joy of being associated with and responding in the best way to, the 'trusted' person. Such a set of circumstances originated from the initiating revealer who is now trusted. If he were not there, or was there but silent, then such joy would even not be a possibility. It is only possible to have such joy because it was first required by the one trusted. Relationally speaking, even the joy of doing what is right has its basis in the One who requires it.

That is the joy which Jesus knew in respect of his Father. He knew what it was to

be an obedient Son and He suffered in a rebellious world for being such. But He had an, inward, secret joy which He experienced every time he did what his Father required. He wanted his disciples to know that inner experience [John 16.9-11]. He knew that this is what He was offering to them when he encouraged them to 'Enter into the joy of your Master' [Matthew 25.14-30]. He was essentially saying to them, 'You will know what I inwardly know'.

All obedient children, while they are children, can know this matter of joy. When they grow up, they may no longer see themselves as children being obedient to their parents in explicit matters, but they may still honour them in a clear, loving attitude taken towards them.

Grace - in relating

When a person, such as a monarch or person in authority, someone in a 'given' relation to us, values us and relates in a friendly way - almost despite their given authority - we say that they are gracious to us. That is, they have adopted a magnanimous stance in relation to us which sets us at our ease. This, in itself, indirectly honours us.

The grace with which they treat us is their initiative to take, it is not ours to presume upon; it comes as a free offer they make as one person to another. They have treated us as a friend, and put themselves at our service, even though they have a high and given authority. So, it is possible for a person with a 'given' relation that we recognise, to treat us graciously as a friend, nevertheless we recognise that this is for them to initiate and not for us. Remember, the mark of friendship in this case is that of self-revelation. So these folks can open themselves to us as they do not keep secret from us their work and central preoccupations. They take us into their agendas in a shared-life way.

On the one hand, we read in the Gospel that Jesus can say to his disciples that he does not think of them as slaves, who simply must do what their master wants. Rather, he says to them that they are friends who have come to share his agenda and mission. They have his mind and they share that. It is a matter of revelation, he has shared with them everything he had of his own inner knowledge of the Father's person and purpose [John 15.14-17].

On the other hand, he can say such things as "you are my friends if you do as I command you" [John 15.14]. This asks them to never think that the 'given' relation is no longer operating. He has been gracious to them, yet, that is his to offer and for them not to presume upon.