

Violence and Glory

Acts 12:1–25

October 26, 2001

Terror has come to the homeland, to our homeland, and for us that is new and different. People have already died by the thousands, and now they die one by one. We all wonder what will happen next. Violence has erupted among us, and some dream of glory. Fear has gripped us, and we are not sure what to do. And yet, there is nothing new under the sun. From the earliest days of the church, middle eastern despots have laid violent hands on the followers of Jesus Christ. Herod killed James the brother of John and who knows how many others. There is nothing new about that. And yet, the church continued to grow. It did not fold in the face of opposition. Perhaps only in America, where life has been easy, has it been possible to misconstrue Christianity to the extent of thinking that to be a follower of Jesus Christ is somehow to be soft or effeminate. But through all the centuries, including the twenty-first century, in all the rest of the world, it has taken courage and strength to be a Christian. And now that requirement is coming home to us. Are we up to the challenge today?

In today's reading, Herod killed Christians for fun, he killed Christians for pleasure, and he killed Christians for political expediency. There is nothing new about that. Alien rulers have made friends by killing Christians. But Herod made a fatal mistake when he confused his own power for violence with the very glory of God. The power to kill is one thing, but the glory of God is quite another. As fearful as the first is, it is nothing compared to the second. We need to be sure that we know the difference. God tolerates a lot of things for a long time, and for that we are very grateful. But God does not long tolerate the arrogance of anyone who presumes to be divine. So, whose side are we on? Humanity's, or God's? Where do we plant our feet in the great struggle of the day? Shall we glorify the power to kill, or shall we seek the glory of God?

The good news here is that God has already defeated the power of evil. That is not at all obvious, looking around the world today, but it is true. God has already defeated the power of evil. This is what Herod did not know, but he learned it the hard way. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been unleashed on the world, and nothing can hold it back. The Roman Empire could not hold it back, its rulers could not hold it back, its soldiers could not hold it back, and its prisons could not hold it back. Neither has anything else since then been able to contain or to constrain the gospel. And the gospel then was not asking just to be recognized. It did not want only one voice among others. It was not content to be one religion among many. The gospel was making a frontal assault on the Roman Empire, attacking everything it held dear, calling into question its worship of its emperors, undermining its power to kill, laying waste to its claim to eternity. Eventually, the empire fell, and the gospel marches on.

You see, the gospel of Jesus Christ has never been just a matter of private opinion, despite the efforts of the Roman Empire or of our secular society to make it so. Instead, the gospel is a matter of public truth, a bright burning fire that obliterates all other claims. It tells us of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the son of God, and it tells us of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. This is the core of the gospel. And this gospel undermines all attempts to divide humanity into good and evil, black and white, rich and poor, native and foreign. This gospel undercuts all attempts to make the value of human life dependent upon merit, perceived worth, or human work or accomplishment. This derails all attempts to elevate the power of violence to the

level of divinity, as if the power to kill had the final say so about who we are. And this gospel obliterates all attempts to claim absolute authority in this world, whether by the state, by the sword, by hidden acts of terror, or even by the church.

This gospel we believe with all our hearts. This gospel we know with all our minds. This gospel we proclaim with our lips and our lives. In this gospel we rejoice. And with this rejoicing, we take up the challenge which the gospel poses to the world in which we live today.

The world about us today deals in the power to kill. It is immense. It is frightening. In new ways, for us, it is working in the shadows. And it is second rate, at best. The power to kill, so obvious in our world today, is a second rate power. That does not mean that it is not real. That does not mean that it cannot kill. That does not mean that it is not horrible. That does not mean that we should not work against it with everything we have. But it does mean that it does not have the last word about us. We do not belong to the powers of this earth. We do not belong to death. We do not belong even to ourselves. We belong to God, who made heaven and earth, who made life and death, who made us for himself, and who holds us dear. Remember that, and it puts everything else into perspective.

In the midst of our struggle in this world, the church has a secret weapon. And that secret weapon is prayer. When Herod seized Peter, and put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, the church prayed for Peter. Can you imagine? They did not march on the capitol. They did not petition the government. They did not demonstrate in the streets. They did not commit acts of subterfuge under the cover of darkness. They prayed. It would appear to be doing nothing, but actually it is most important. They prayed. God did the rest.

Now, when it says that “earnest” prayer was made for Peter, it does not mean they mentioned him once and then forgot about him. It means that they prayed fervently, deeply, continuously, and repeatedly. They prayed as if his life depended upon it, which, in fact, it did. Even then, when help came, Peter did not at first recognize it as real. The angel had to wake him up. How often has God found us sleeping? And when Peter was rescued, those still deep in prayer could hardly realize it, though they were praying for him! Why was Peter rescued? So that the gospel might be preached and continue its advance into the world. And Herod’s bloodlust, deprived of the apostle Peter, satisfied itself with the execution of his own sentries. Thus he continued to convince himself of the usefulness of his power to kill and of the glory of his office and person.

All of this came to a head when Herod held in his hand the fate of the entire people of Tyre and Sidon. Out of desperation for food, they called him “god.” And by this point, Herod was believing his own propaganda. He thought that his capacity for violence, his power to kill, made him divine. But at that very instant God struck him dead, and the worms ate his body.

Meanwhile, the word of God grew and multiplied. The gospel advanced. The church of Jesus Christ reached more and more people even while Rome mourned its loss. More people came to know their Lord and Savior. More people’s lives were turned around. More people learned of the love of God and therefore learned to love each other. Soon it would be said of the early Christians that they lived better than others in the Roman Empire, they thought better than others in the Roman Empire, and they died better than others in the Roman Empire. There was a noticeable difference about them. And it came from Jesus Christ.

Today we face a world strange and unfamiliar to us, a world in which our enemies’ power to kill has been brought into our homeland, and a world in which we are eager to trust our own government’s power to kill in return and so to obliterate the enemy. The even greater danger is that either side will think it is divine. And yet, we know better. God is God, and we are not. God is God,

and no human power in this world is God. God alone is God, and God does not long tolerate the arrogance of anyone who presumes to be divine.

Before God's true glory we both rejoice and tremble. We rejoice in the good it brings to this world. We tremble at the destruction it brings to this world. We rejoice in this good hope. We tremble at the upheaval which it brings. The glory of God is too awesome to behold. The God of glory is made known in the humility of Jesus Christ. He was born in a barn, laid in a feed trough, killed on a cross, and buried in someone else's grave. And yet, he conquers all.

In the clash of violence and glory, in our strange new world full of old struggles, what are we to do today? First, we acknowledge that to God belongs the glory. The glory is not ours, nor does it belong to the church, to our nation, or to our enemy. The glory belongs to God and to God alone. How liberating this is! The United States is glorious, but only in a very limited way; its glory is not divine. Some would consider our enemies glorious, but we know that their claims are false; the glory belongs to God. It is hard today not to live in fear. But we realize that fear grows out of the mistake of misconstruing the power to kill as something absolute, when, in fact, it is not. Even the power to kill is now a broken power. Death has done its worst in our world, and it has not won the day. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and that changes everything. To God belongs the glory!

Second, we pray. This is our secret weapon. More powerful than armies or executioners, prayer calls forth the promised help of God. We pray for rescue, we pray for our nation, we pray for our leaders, we pray for our military, and we even pray for our enemies. That is not to say that we shall escape forever. Eventually, we shall all die, each in our own day. But until then, God can use us to advance the gospel, to share God's love, and to build up the church. This is the very reason we live, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

So, third, we continue to live and share the gospel. This is who we are and what we are about. We are a small part of the most important, grand thing that has ever happened in the world. As a side line, this will challenge, critique, and confront every element and affirmation of the society in which we find ourselves. But that is only a side line, an implication. It is not the main task. The main task is living and sharing the gospel. When all is said and done, there will be something more important than higher education, as delightful as that is. There will be something more important than the economy, as if that were what fed us and sustained our lives. There will be something even more important than the United States of America, as hard as that is to imagine. When all is said and done, the gospel will have been preached to all the world. The word of God will have grown and multiplied. The name of Jesus Christ will be known to all people. The kingdom of God will finally be established. And all the kingdoms of this world will have vanished. The power of death will be undone. Violence will have been eradicated, not by human effort but by the hand of God. We are called now, you and I, to be part of that which has already been and of that which is yet to be. There is no greater calling. There is nothing more important we can do with our lives. Whatever our work, whatever our family, whatever our gifts, let us live, not to our own glory, and certainly not to that of state or church, but to the glory of God alone.

The good news here is that God has already defeated the power of evil. That is not at all obvious, looking around the world today, but it is true. God has already defeated the power of evil. This gospel of Jesus Christ has been unleashed on the world, and nothing can hold it back.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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