

RETURN TO THE GLORY DAYS

There are some experts who deal in restoration – putting things back to how they were. Perhaps it's a faded painting or damaged fabric or perhaps it goes further and it's restoration of a whole crumbling building.

The National Trust says it hopes that “Clandon Park can be rebuilt in some shape or form following the fire which broke out on Wednesday 29 April 2015. The fire reduced the 18th-century mansion near Guildford in Surrey built for Lord Onslow to a shell but the external walls remain largely intact. ...the house suffered extensive damage ...thousands of items were lost ...roof and floors collapsed” It will be one mighty project to restore it but even then the hope is only to rebuild in 'some shape or form'. It's almost impossible to believe it can be *restored to its former glory*

When things are not as good as they used to be it can be hard to remember the former glory and hard to imagine a glorious future. It's easy to get despondent. Glory – what does it mean anyhow?

Do the Manchester United fans wonder if there will ever be a return to the glory days when they won all the trophies? In our churches, do the people who hark back to days of Sunday Schools having 100 children on their books ever imagine things can be so good again?

Some people 'go out in a blaze of glory', others bathe in 'reflected glory' of knowing someone who has done well. Glory seems to be about something that is a spectacle, something to marvel at, achievement, success, worthy of praise, drawing attention.

Glory had been a theme for the people of Israel at different times in their history. Above all, it was the way God showed his character.

In the Exodus, God was a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud to show people

the way; at Mount Sinai he appeared literally in a blaze of glory as a fire surrounded the mountain; at the tent of meeting set up for worship, *'the cloud covered the Tent and the glory of the Lord filled it...Moses couldn't enter the Tent because the cloud had settled upon it and the glory of the Lord filled it'* (Ex. 40:34)

These were signs of God being with people. It was comforting, it was awesome, it was a reminder of power and greatness.

Things move on and when Ezekiel comes into action, he sees visions of God and in chapter one we read of how Ezekiel sees God: *“like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down...”* (1:28)

Light and glory and it brings some kind of physical impact. He falls face down.

But if you take God for granted it doesn't last. If you act as if you don't want him there, then you can't blame him if he goes and Ezekiel has the awful experience of seeing exactly that. In chapter 10 - *“the glory of the Lord rose and moved to the threshold of the temple....and the glory of the Lord departed”* (10:4, 18)

The glory of God has gone. Not just a bit of sparkle. Is this a sign that God himself has given up on them? Thankfully, no, not quite.

A little later: *“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: although I sent them far away....I will gather you and bring you back....”* (11:16,17)

However bad things get, God doesn't give up unless his people do. But can they believe it? That despondency sets in. It's hard to remember the glory days and impossible to imagine a future beyond a painful and long exile.

I was struck by something I heard on the news this week when Michael Gove, who is now the Justice Secretary, talked of bringing a 'reforming zeal into the dark corners of our prison system'. He said he wanted to stop society thinking about criminals who just needed to be warehoused. But this was the

thing that struck me: he said that as a politician and as a Christian he believed in the possibility of redemption.

That's a word not often used in politics. Redemption. Buying someone back. Giving them a second chance. But it's right at the heart of our Bible. Anyone may have the hope of redemption. They won't always take hold of it, but it can be held out to them.

So for ezeziel's people those words that promised return were a bridge. Could they remember the glory? If they could, did they ever imagine it was possible to restore life again? It was probably far easier to see what they had lost than imagine what they might gain. Do you ever feel like that? You cling onto what's past even if it's not great because you can't see how it will be better ahead?

And then we have it: *"I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east....and the land was radiant with his glory (it would be quite something to be in that reflected glory!)..... and what happens? I fell face down....the glory of the Lord entered the temple and the glory of the Lord filled the temple....(Ezek. 43:1-4, 44:4)*

Glory returned.

Well it wasn't just a bright journey all the way from that point on but if we fast forward to the time of Jesus' presentation in the temple of his day, there's an echo. People were still waiting for their Saviour. Simeon just knows he has arrived. That old man, captivated by a baby. *"My eyes have seen your salvation (like Ezekiel he saw the glory) a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:29-32)

The crowning glory. Yet not just for Israel because the exclusive sense of God belonging to them had to go. This was for revelation to all people. Ezekiel had told a message that said only the designated prince could sit in the temple court near the door where the Lord had entered. Now there's no restriction. With God's Spirit in us it's revelation, for anyone! The glory days are coming. Redemption, hope for anyone; restoration to the former glory and beyond.

It came at a price, of course. It would cost Jesus his friends his reputation, his life. But if glory is about how God reveals himself and does what is worth praise and achieves good results, then his death and resurrection were what showed glory most of all. In heaven, says the last book of the Bible, there won't even be a need of a sun or a moon because God will be the light, the radiance, the glory and there, too, people will see the radiance of the rainbow and fall down in true worship. This isn't an old building rebuilt 'in some shape or form'. This is restoration of relationships with God as they were always meant to be.

So what does it mean for us?

1. Don't give up on the hope of redemption. Don't write anyone off.
2. Glory can come in unexpected ways. It came through a baby and it came first to shepherds, peasant people, an unmarried mother and an old man and woman because they were open to God. If we opened our eyes and hearts this week, we might see glory in the most unexpected places.
3. Then let our response be in trust and praise that we can share in the glory of God himself.