

Sunday After the Ascension

The New Testament lesson for today, John: 17, is often called “Our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer”. It includes our Lord’s intercession for His disciples whom He is leaving behind, and for those of us who have become part of the Apostolic community through the teaching and preaching of the Church. It is, in a sense, the first prayer for the whole state of Christ’s church. It is not a prayer for the world but rather a prayer for the Church.

The prayer is somewhat long and some might even say rambles a bit, not at all like Jesus’ public discourses, which are organized and compact. But, as is the case with many priests, prayer and preaching are two different forms of communication.

Jesus begins by summarizing His ministry on earth. He rehearses His accomplishments, not with the idea of boasting but rather with the idea of offering them to the Father. In the process, Jesus gives us an insight into what He Himself considers to be the most important aspects of His mission.

Various people have their own ideas about the most significant accomplishments of Jesus Christ. Some cite His moral teachings and His challenges to the prevailing culture. Perhaps one thinks of His apparent pacifism and non-violent attitude. Others may cite His association with the poor and the outcasts or His willingness to forgive. According to His own judgment, here are the most important things that Jesus has done.

The first thing is that He glorified God:

"I have glorified thee on the earth."

The second thing is that He revealed the nature of God, not to everyone, but to the Apostles:

"I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world"

The third thing is that He secured the faith and obedience of that community:

"I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them and have known surely that I came out from thee and they have believed that thou didst send me."

So, the establishment of the Church, which many believe to be a kind of optional extra, or by-product of, Christianity, is actually the most important achievement in the ministry of Jesus, according to His own assessment. It is that achievement that He offers to the Father in the hours just before His death.

Then, having offered the fruits of His labor, Jesus asks the Father to bless that offering. Offering the fruits of one's labor to God and asking Him to bless those fruits is the essential action of the Eucharist. What Jesus is offering here is the body that will continue on earth after His own physical body has been offered on the Cross. In other words, He is offering us as a living sacrifice, and asking God to bless us.

The first blessing that Jesus asks for us is that we may be one in the same way that He and the Father are one.

The persons of the Trinity are one and yet each is unique. They are equal but not identical. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not interchangeable. They always act in concert because each of them constantly gives Himself completely to the others.

A good example of this kind of unity on earth is the bond of Holy Matrimony. A man and his wife become one flesh but remain two distinct individuals. They act in concert because they contribute their uniqueness completely each to the other. Anything one achieves is the achievement of both. Anything that hurts one hurts both. In concept, that is how marriage is supposed to work. And that's how the Church is supposed to work as well.

As Americans we are so familiar with corporate structures and mergers that we automatically think of Church unity in the same terms. But that's not what Jesus prays for. He prays that we may be one as He and the Father are one.

The second blessing that Jesus desires for His Church is protection from evil:

"I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil [one]."

As long as the Church is in the world, it will be subject to the same pressures, the same risks, and the same problems as any

other institution. We are human and the Church is comprised of sinners and is constantly looking to add more sinners to its membership. With that in mind, it is reasonable to expect that there will be scandals and arguments and that the Church will fall short of the vision that Jesus has for it. But Jesus has asked the Father to preserve us in spite of all that.

To keep us from the evil one is not to keep us from contact with evil or from being victimized by evil but simply to keep us from falling under his control.

The history of the Church demonstrates that this prayer has been answered. The Church has survived persecution, internal corruption, heresy and schism, neglect, worldly affluence, worldly poverty, and public scandal. Yet, the Church continues, propped up by the power of God.

“The gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”

Finally, Jesus asks that the Church may be blessed with everlasting joy. The source of this joy is Christ Himself, whose triumph and glory He desires to share with His bride. Those who have died with Him will rise with Him. Those who have shared His tribulations will share His joy. Not only the Apostles, but all who believe in Jesus because of the Apostolic witness, are to receive these blessings. That is what Jesus asks for His Church.

The book of Hebrews calls Jesus our great high priest. People have called this chapter in St. John’s Gospel “the High Priestly Prayer”. It is a prayer of intercession, and it is also a prayer of

consecration. It is not a one-time prayer but an ongoing activity of the risen Christ. What every priest does all over the world, is to reflect and embody on earth the continuing action of the Lord in heaven. They intercede for you and offer gifts on your behalf. God in turn blesses those gifts. So, our Lord in heaven intercedes for us and offers us as His gift to the Father. And God blesses us.

It is that ongoing act of consecration that makes the Church holy in spite of all our human defects. And it is that consecration, reflected in the Holy Eucharist, that enables the church not only to survive but ultimately to prevail.

To the only wise God, OUR SAVIOR
Be glory, majesty, dominion, and power
Both now and forever, Amen