

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Sunday after Ascension

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Verse of the thirty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... The LORD is exalted; for he dwelleth on high: he hath filled Zion with judgment and righteousness. And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the LORD is his treasure....

“... Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off.... Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.³

“These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and

they have kept thy word. Now they have known that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are of thee. For 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. I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled. And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The New Testament lesson for today is often called “Our Lord’s High Priestly Prayer”. It includes our Lord’s intercession for His disciples whom He is leaving behind, and also 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. It is a prayer for the Church.

The prayer is long and rambling and a bit repetitious—not at all like Jesus’ public discourses, which are organized and compact. But prayer and preaching are two different forms of communication. I do not pray the way I preach, and I do not preach the way I pray.

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. Some cite His moral teachings. Some cite His challenges to the prevailing culture. Some cite His apparent pacifism and non-violent attitude. Some cite His association with the poor and the outcasts. Some cite His willingness to forgive everyone and everything. But here are the most important things that Jesus has done according to His own judgment.

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 to, 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. I might also observe that 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. Note the qualification.

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

The nearest thing we have on earth to that kind of unity 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. That, at least, is the ideal. That’s how marriage is supposed to work. And that’s how the Church is supposed to work as well.

We Americans 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 shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest 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. Furthermore the Church is comprised of sinners and is constantly looking to add more sinners to its membership. So you have 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 him or from being victimized by him 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 in spite of herself: “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 I do at this altar, and what every priest does all over the world, is to reflect and embody on earth the continuing action of the Lord in heaven. I intercede for you, and I offer gifts your behalf. God 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.

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 33:5-6, 17, 20-22 (KJV).

³ St. John 17 (KJV).