

“I am praying for them”  
John 17:1-11  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 24, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the first portion of what is known as Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, highlighted perhaps by this one simple phrase therein: “I am praying for them.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

To understand this passage correctly and take proper instruction and comfort from it, we must read it in context of the verses that follow, especially as that context is most clearly spelled out in verse 20: Jesus prays, “I pray not only for these, but for all who believe in Me through their word.” Thus, up to that point Jesus was only praying “for these”, which means our reading today is only about Jesus’ prayer for his apostles. We see the consistency in thought between his prayer and his words at the end of Matthew 28 spoken *to his apostles*. Indeed, today: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh” ... doesn’t that sound like Matthew 28, “all authority has been given to me” and how does Jesus continue there in Matthew 28, “Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing... and teaching them” ... or, as he prays in our text... “given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him” (or, “make disciples of all nations.”)

And all of that which Jesus says in Matthew 28 comes right before he ascends into heaven, so that it makes perfect sense that that ascension is that for which Jesus yearns when he prays in our text, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

So, here we are the Sunday after the Ascension, meditating upon the words Jesus prayed in anticipation of his ascension... and he prayed, not just *in view of* his ascension, but *for* those who would be his apostles... and when did he first highlight them as his apostles?: Pentecost – next Sunday. So, between Ascension and Pentecost, let us learn what Jesus prayed for the sake of his apostles, and how that – in turn – relates to we who are those who “will believe in Me through their word.”

Regarding his apostles, Jesus’ prayer continues, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept Your word.” Doesn’t this bring such marvelous comfort in a few ways: first, that it informs our understanding of what we heard Jesus say last week, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Had the apostles been perfect followers? Absolutely not! On this very night of Jesus’ prayer would they be perfect followers? No, they’d run away in fear and even deny him, to be brought to repentance and freely forgiven. And yet, Jesus says in His prayer to the Father that the disciples have “kept Your Word.” Yes, they had

not “obeyed it perfectly,” but they had cherished it, desired to learn it and safeguard it. Jesus sees that their hearts love the Word of God, even though those same sinful hearts would still at times fall into shame and vice. Nevertheless, the Spirit had created faith that cherished and desired to cling to and “keep” God’s Word.

Second, what marvelous comfort that the apostles had been chosen according to the Father’s plans: Jesus says, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me... Yours they were, and you gave them to me.” Yes, God’s election and purpose is so sure that we Christians never have to doubt whether God is mindful toward us. Even down to the very individuals who would first learn, record, and hand down that apostolic faith to each successive generation, the Father had that planned... not just for their sake, but “for those who will believe in [the Christ] through their word.”

Now, how does God’s great election and purpose and holy will play out, but through His blessed means of grace. Jesus continues, “I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” Notice that: “I have given them the words You gave me.” faith comes by hearing, the Word is received. And what is it that even the apostles heard? What is the gospel from which they benefited and the Word which they received in their very ears and mouths? That Christ came into

the world, God made flesh, Son of God and Son of man, of virgin birth ... sent by and from the Father as the Christ, the long-promised Messiah to atone for the sins of the whole world through his sacrificial death. Yes, faith in that Gospel first pronounced in Eden comes by hearing that age-old declaration, receiving its benefits in the Sacrament... that was even so for the disciples... and faith burns in the heart and cherishes/keeps that Word, even when that sinful heart trembles in the face of trouble and shows itself to be the very sinner for whom Christ needed to die. Indeed, in the face of such trouble leading to guilt and shame, the sinner may cling all the more firmly to that Christ the Father has sent, and the faith that the sinner has gained by knowing the truth through the Words received as spoken by the very Christ that came from and now has returned to the Father.

And, because Jesus knows our clinging to Him is weakened by the frailty of our sinful nature, He prays for us. He prays for His Church. He prays for His apostles. "I am praying for them," Jesus appeals to the Father. How much comfort is that, first – and most specific to this text – for the apostles! Their work cannot be in vain; their labor of proclaiming the gospel and handing down the faith cannot be in vain. Their suffering was not in vain; their martyrdom was not in vain. For Jesus promised them success when He appealed to the Father and said, "I am praying for them."

And, if that's true for their promised success and for the promised growth of the Church and the safeguarded handing down of the faith, then how much certainty you can have in that Church, and in its life and doctrine and confession. For Christ prayed for His apostles, and God's Will for His Church cannot be prevailed against.

As much time as you could spend pondering that remarkable truth that Jesus not only established His Church through the apostles, but actively prayed for it and interceded for it as its great High Priest (remember, this is the "High Priestly Prayer"), you could equally spend time pondering the words he says next: "I am **not** praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours."

That comment should evoke the greatest fear in your Old Adam and all who want to be people of worldly ways. Jesus specifically makes sure His Father hears it from His own mouth: "I am not praying for the world." Jesus, who perfectly keeps the Fathers holy will and, indeed, is One with the Father, prays in his perfect prayer, that he is not praying for the world. Isn't that comment alone enough to drive you into the dust and beg for mercy?! Beg for mercy, because Jesus isn't saying that he doesn't desire the world's salvation (later in the prayer he will pray that His Church "become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me")... but, this *does* drive us to beg for mercy because Jesus *is* saying that to be of the world is incompatible with being in the safety of the Church.

If you think you can be “of the world” and still have Christ’s blessing, think again! And as you think of all those worldly ways that you’ve engaged in, worldly ways you’ve loved and desired as your own, worldly ways that are at odds with and have opposed your baptism and ignored your identity in Christ Jesus, repent of them all! Despair of them all! Flee them all!... and take great solace in hearing Christ say to you, “I forgive you your sins” and take great joy in invitation by Christ to feed you, “This is my body, my blood, for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Indeed, take comfort that the Christ who laid down his life in this world for the sake of the world even though he knew he would be rejected by the world... that same Christ – through your baptism and in forgiveness – has taken you out of the world (isn’t that the very word “Church” – ekklesia – “called out of”) ... taken you out of the world and into the Church and in this Church applies to you all the benefits of His cross... He forgives you, intercedes for you, prays for you.

Now, Jesus’ prayer for the disciples transitions to the thought and the truth that he would not be with them much longer – at least not visibly, not in his earthly ministry – and he prays in view of his coming crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension: “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world and I am coming to you.”

Pause there for a second and think about that. In all the Scripture, the only one who ever says anything sympathetic about any “felt separation” at Jesus’ ascension is Jesus himself. The epistles

never “commiserate” that Jesus has visibly departed, and we just heard that, at Jesus’ ascension, the disciples returned to the temple with great joy, blessing God’s name. And they did so, they were strengthened in faith to do so, specifically because Jesus had prayed for them and interceded for them as High Priest because he had sympathized with their need when their Rabbi and Messiah would no longer be visibly with them.

Do you sometimes think that Jesus is not sympathetic to the fact that sometimes you wonder whether your Christ has left you? Do you think Jesus just *assumes* you’re always going to have the strength of faith to return to the house of God continually blessing God’s name in the joy of the ascension of our Lord. No, as he prayed for his disciples, he did not pray only for their benefit; he prayed that they would be strengthened because they were the eyewitnesses; they were the recorders of the history of it all; they were the handers down of the faith, the first pastors, and would be among the first martyrs. And, through it all, Jesus prayed for them, appealing directly to the Father: “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”

How necessary that the apostles be one... one in the name of God, one in the confession and doctrine and proclamation of God’s Holy Will and new creation-defining Gospel. How necessary, not only for their sake as individual souls, but for your sake, for my sake, and for the sake of all who would believe in Christ through their word.

Be not indifferent toward this text just because it doesn't specifically speak of you, nor be jealous of the apostles for being the centrality of Jesus' prayer (at least, to this point in John 17). Rather, thank God that Christ Jesus foreknew that through those whom He sent, the whole world would hear the proclamation and the whole Church would benefit from, as the apostle says it, the faith once delivered to the saints. Indeed, the whole Church – called out of the world to be people of God – can attach its own eternal well-being to Christ's prayer for the apostles, and as those looking on from 2000 years removed, may say, "Yes, how pleasing is the Son's prayer and how certainly did the Father protect those apostles, and how undeniably has the Church survived good times and bad... for the crucified, risen and ascended Lord who once interceded for the Twelve now intercedes for us all, that we may live in the certain confidence that nothing shall prevail against Christ and His Church.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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