

Ascension to Pentecost Reflection by David Kennedy

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people,^[a] to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ⁶"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that^[b] you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost,^[c] so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.^[d] ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.^[e] ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I consecrate myself, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. (John 17. 1-19)

This reading is part of the profound prayer that is often called the Great High Priestly Prayer of Jesus; the prayer offered before the great self-sacrifice of Christ, who is both priest and victim. Bishop Brooke Fosse Westcott of Durham called it 'the Prayer of Consecration', in a striking allusion to Holy Communion, because within it, Jesus consecrates himself that we too might be consecrated in him. We are indeed on holy ground. Chronologically in John's Gospel, this prayer is prayed at the Last Supper, and before the Cross and Resurrection. In other words, it anticipates what is still yet to come. Only at noon on the following day could the hour be finally fulfilled; only then could Jesus ascend the throne of the Cross to reign; only at 3pm, could the triumphant cry 'It is accomplished' ring out.

And yet in John 17, Jesus prays as if the hour *has already* come, as if he has *already* been glorified, as if his work *is already* finished, and as if he is no longer in the world, although chronologically, of course, he quite clearly is. And so, I would suggest to you that John, just before launching into his narrative of Good Friday, suddenly transports us to post-Easter realities. In John 17 we have the prayer of the One who is *already* exalted, who has been raised from death to eternal life— and remember in John, the 'lifting up', resurrection and ascension are not thought of as three separate events

– that Jesus died, rose again on Easter Day and ascended subsequently on Ascension Day – remember his words to the Magdalene in the Easter Garden, as she tried to cling to him in heart-bursting joy, – Jesus rebuked her: ‘Do not cling on to me, for I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’. To be raised is to be exalted; to be raised is to ascend. And so, John brings the eternal into the chronology of time. Christ prays in John 17 as the exalted one, who is no longer in the world, but whose dying and rising have set free the Spirit to manifest the new creation.

Why does John do this? The answer is that he is writing for his own post-Easter community of Jesus’ disciples’ and so he is writing for us as their successors. He is writing for us today.

There is an unshakable confidence in the prayer of John 17. Placed before the Cross, there is no doubt about the outcome. The prayer is the prayer of one who is victorious, whose purposes are assured. It’s not to say of course that there is no sense of wrestling in prayer. After all, Jesus does pray fervently for the protection of this own – suggesting that the continuing battle with evil is an exacting and perilous one; he does pray fervently for the oneness of his people, suggesting that such oneness will be struggled for in reality of the difficulties in human relationships. But the point I think we must hold on to is that, rather like the Epistle to the Hebrews, God in Christ has accomplished something which cannot be shaken, and so this is the basis of our hope and confidence when we dare to try to see things from the divine perspective; when like Jesus we dare to lift up our eyes to heaven and cry ‘Father’.

What is Jesus doing today? The answer is that he is praying. His continuing work is to intercede at the right hand of the Father. He is continuously pleading his passion before the face of the Father. He is pleading his sacrifice – yes, the sacrifice made upon the Cross, for the salvation of the world but which is eternally efficacious. And he is praying for us, his Church, for our protection from evil, for our unity, for our growth in love and faith. And he takes our prayers and unites them to his perfect prayer. Jesus never offers to the Father anything that is not perfect. You may feel your prayers are weak and poor, not worth very much. But so long as we consciously and sincerely pray them *through* Jesus - after all, we often conclude by saying – *through Jesus Christ our Lord*, Jesus takes our less than perfect prayers and makes them part of his perfect intercession to the Father. Our prayers really do get *through* – to the Father’s heart, when we pray in union and through Jesus our Lord.

Be joyful. The Lord prays for you, because he loves you. His saving purposes are unshakable. He is at the right hand of the Majesty on high and lives ever to pray for us. So pray, and never lose heart.