

John 17:6-19
Ephesians 1:15-23
May 16, 2021

In This World

Today is Ascension Sunday. It marks the end of the season of Easter, and presents the physical absence of Jesus in this world. For he was taken up into heaven, as Paul wrote, “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but in the one to come.”

The absence of the bodily Jesus was a difficult and undeniable reality. Present believers share with those who preceded them this situation, that they believe in the resurrection, the being aliveness, of one who is not physically present. For this one week of the year we observe that absence as a spiritual discipline. That is, we ask what can be learned from it, about ourselves and this world, and about God and salvation.

In the Gospel of John, while in prayer, Jesus confronts this circumstance. He understood that he was going to leave the world, and that his followers would remain. Jesus prayed for their protection; he prayed for their joy, he prayed for their sanctification.

To be protected implies, of course, that there is danger. “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.” What might we say are the greatest threats believers face in the world?

The other two prayers Jesus makes give a clue. He prays, “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am in the world, so that they might have the full measure of my joy within them.”

One of the primary tendencies among human beings is to be selfish. There is anxiety about one’s own safety, well-being and pleasure. The selfishness threatens to take away the joy of being alive and the further joy of being in God’s grace. Jesus knew that his physical absence would intensify this threat.

The loss of joy stands for all the ways our lives threaten the high quality of living we have been promised; concerns about “this life,” fears about “life in the Valley of the Shadow,” grievances about various things. When Jesus prays for protection, he knows that the concerns must be attended to; that death is real and hovers over us like a cloud, a shadow, and that many grievances are legitimate, he is praying that life’s fulness not be diminished by them.

Next, Jesus prays for sanctification. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.”

Sanctification refers to the process of being made “holy” like God is holy. It is a high aspiration, that human beings can be purified, undefiled.

The Christian faith has insisted down the centuries, that like justification, sanctification is beyond the

power of any person to achieve. It is a Grace. It is a gift of God.

Every person is engulfed in the selfishness that is characteristic of human life, and moves, by grace, towards service as a way of life, towards concern for others, for the greater good. Sanctification stands for this movement. It is a preparation for eternity.

Jesus prays for this, and not only for the people of his time and place, though he surely had them in mind, but also for the people of all times and places. The Lord knows we resist. But God's grace also works in us to break down our resistance.

It is Ascension Sunday. To ascend means to go up. Jesus went up to prepare a place for us. We are here being prepared ourselves for that same journey. The place Jesus makes ready for us is, to be sure, a beautiful place, a place of incomparable wonder. It is our true home. It is filled with inner peace and joy, and goodness, love and kindness. It is a better than we deserve, and that is why our time here, in this world, is important.

All of life is an ascension, and what ascends is not economic status or social standing, or political fortune, for these are of no consequence in the place that is being prepared for us. What is ascending is our character:

To become less selfish and more generous,
less willing to deceive and more honest,

less willing to turn away from the world's pain
and more willing to help carry the world's burden,
less desirous to be served and more willing to serve.
Less vulnerable to anger and fear.

Words like; honesty, courage, integrity, honor,
kindness, generosity, to represent the character we
lack and to which we aspire. These are high words
that represent high realities, and after Jesus, we rise to
them.

Jesus prays that nothing will remove our joy in this life,
and that nothing would prevent our preparation for the
journey to heaven that lies before us.

We are invited to the place far above rule and
authority, power and dominion, to that place beyond
the power of the world to harm us, where goodness
and mercy abide. May we accept the invitation, to the
glory of God.

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