

Psalm 1
John 17:6-19
May 12, 2024

Two Prayers

What a glorious time of year it is! At least around here we are in the greenest, lushest, wettest time of the year. Springtime is the season of Easter because it represents the renewal of life, makes one think of resurrection.

Today we honor our mothers and along with them, all the women who have cared for and nurtured us, and taught us about faith. By so doing, we recognize both the importance of family *and* the family of faith.

It is a time when God's character of love and sacrifice, mercy, and life itself, is revealed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son. Actually, today is the seventh Sunday in the Easter season and the last. Next week is Pentecost, which marks the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We take our readings this year from the Gospel of John. As I mentioned last week, John is different from the other gospels. In today's text we find Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples on the day before his execution. He has washed their feet, predicted the betrayal of Judas and the denials of Peter; he has long tried to explain, in John's way, that he is leaving them and that they shouldn't be worried about it. He has promised the Holy Spirit. He has commanded them to love each other.

And then he prays. In John, the prayer is not in the garden but after the meal in the same place. The whole story takes up four full chapters, and the prayer itself takes up one. It is divided into three parts; he prayed for himself, for his disciples, and then for all believers, especially those who would come along later and believe without having seen, without having lived through these events that are being described.

Our attention is given today to the part of the prayer devoted to the disciples. The main emphasis of the prayer for his disciples is for their protection in a world that will not accept them because of their faith;

"I will remain in the world no longer," he says, "but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name . . ." It is helpful to remember that Jesus is praying in their presence, so that they benefit from hearing the prayer. He goes on to say,

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." . . . and then he says, "Sanctify them by the truth."

It is quite an astonishing prayer, and only after he is finished do they leave for the Kidron Valley where he is arrested. Without giving any kind of time-table he leaves them . . . us . . . in what is thought of as a hostile world. Here we are almost 2,000 years later, in a world that can still be thought of as hostile, for some more than others.

It has customary to speak of the ways the world is dangerous; the wars, the diseases, the poverty, the social unrest, and the intense demands that mark everyday life. The pervasive threat of dissatisfaction. Then we realize that Jesus prayed his prayer long ago before any of the present circumstances had developed.

Everything is different now than it was then. One wonders if it more or less dangerous. There have been amazing changes in terms of knowledge and technology, which have affected the way we live our daily lives; and the political and social ordering of the world has undergone tremendous shifts that also affect the way we live;

Some of these changes have come in just the last couple of hundred years. For instance, children go to school as never before; more people live now in cities than on farms or in small villages and towns; for the first time in history, communication and transportation around the globe has become normal, when before it was not; all this and more.

Many of the changes have been the result of great feats of accomplishment; the developments of industrial machines that enable people to fly and to build large buildings and perform instantaneously what once took days or weeks, or was simply impossible. We must consider much that has happened, as good. We are on the precipice of artificial intelligence, which is feared even by some of its creators.

And yet in some ways everything is the same. *human nature has not changed*. People remain self-centered, able to misunderstand and mischaracterize one another, and thus to disregard each other's well-being.

We are prone to excess, and to the taking of actions without fully knowing and understanding the outcomes. The corruptions of power and wealth are the same now as ever.

People are as prone as they ever were of either thinking their way through life without much feeling, or feeling their way through life without much thinking; experiencing the difficulty of striking the right balance between head and heart that people of all times and places have experienced, and realizing that believing, trusting, our way through life offers the chance to strike that balance.

We have a grand word for it. It is called Sin, and though it is not a popular word, there is still no better. And if you scratch the surface of even the most secular person, you will find that even *they believe* in it.

In this prayer we see Jesus trusting his way through the most difficult crisis of his life. He prays two prayers; for protection from the evil one, and for sanctification. To sanctify something, of course, is to set it apart as holy, which involves the work of God, a slow and arduous transformation of life that includes repentance and discipline, something Jesus felt it right

to pray for because it stretches beyond the possibilities of human potential.

The modern period with all its achievements has tempted people to think more highly of themselves than they ought; and to entertain higher expectations for both their individual moral capabilities, and that of their groups, and has given them as well an oversized confidence in the human ability to solve problems through the accumulation of knowledge and technology, and the use of reason.

Among the missions of the church, which include to teach and learn, to worship and to serve, to proclaim and to love, is also to pray. These two prayers are a good place to start.

All of us experience the dangerous as well as the wondrous side of life in this world. There is no way to withdraw enough to avoid the danger, and anyway we are not called to withdraw. So we pray with Jesus for protection from the evil one, that there would be no permanent harm.

And we pray, like Jesus, for sanctification, that even in a world such as this one, no matter how scarred, there might be a holy people, set apart for service to God, and for good in the world. And let us learn it as a lesson to the women of faith in our lives; a lesson we learn from Jesus, and the two prayers he prayed for his disciples, just before he left them.

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