

Jesus Prays For Us

A Little Bit of Heaven (John 17:1-8)

At the Last Supper Jesus spoke of his Father forty-seven times. He had drawn his apostles to realize that the Father was as close and available to them as the Son who sat and ate with them. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus helped them to see that God was more than an impersonal force “up there.” God was a Father who is “right here.” People through all of history have tended to keep God at a distance, pushing him to a world beyond the skies. Then, with no apologies for the contradictory attitude, people demand that God be as near as a beloved friend.

Too many people box up God as an idea, an impersonal force, ominously powerful, too far away to be caring, too busy with the galaxies to worry about the everyday troubles of mothers with sick children, a husband fearful of losing his job, a teacher despairing of his students, a grandmother battling melanoma, a homeowner scraping up mortgage payments.

Those who promote the abstract God may like this approach because this keeps the divine under control. They smooth the wrinkles out of God’s face and make him bland enough to be harmless – and irrelevant. Drained of blood, the body of this God is a distant “something” that has no impact on people.

Jesus spoke for those who hunger for a God who cares for people. Jesus used family language when talking of God. God is a lot more than a force. God is a Father. There are family ties between God the Son and God the Father. Better yet, there is a familial connection between the Father and all his daughters and sons on earth. The “My Father” of Jesus is the “Our Father” of the human race.

Around the family table of the final Passover, Jesus made visible the presence of the greatest patriarch of all, the affectionate Father of each human being. Jesus became positively lyrical at this moment when revealing the presence of his Father at the “head of the table” of the banquet of life.

The only explicit reference in the gospels to Jesus singing is at the Last Supper (see Mark 14:26). The text of John 17 has such a melodic quality that it is quite possible it was used as a Eucharistic hymn by the early Christians, almost like the Preface of the Catholic Mass today. If then Jesus ever were to be heard singing, it was because he was so delighted to reveal his Father to the family.

In the ecstasy of those last intimate moments with his closest friends on earth, Jesus sang, “I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world” (verse 8). Philosophers use reason to speak of an impersonal God. Jesus used revelation to tell us that God is as personal as a caring Father. “I revealed your name.”

Jesus brought the glory of the Father to the simplicity of the Last Supper table. In the synoptic gospels Jesus often compared heaven to a joyous dinner party. In John’s gospel, Jesus transformed the Passover Meal into a foretaste of heaven. Precisely through the eventful, last splendid meal, Jesus could gesture to the table and then to the community around it and say, “Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you have sent, Jesus Christ” (verse 3). Through the simple reality of a celebratory feast, Jesus offered them – and us – a revelation of heaven.

This is the mood, the scene, the holy environment in which we should hear his words about heaven. This is the context of understanding his description of heaven as “knowing” our Father. The verb “to know” in Hebrew means love knowledge, not simply book knowledge. In heaven we do not know about the Father, like a biologist looking at a specimen. We know our Father. In heaven we would do more than stand at a reverential distance and shyly peek at the glory. No. There we are grasped by our Father with the kind of love we have always dreamed of. This is a knowledge replenished with everlasting affection. Now that is “eternal life.

Jesus tells us there is more to be said. Eternal life begins here. Heaven starts on earth. At the Last Supper Jesus did not speak in the future tense, but the present one. He did not say that one day they would know the Father and then enter eternal life. Nothing so vague and promissory for Jesus. Right then in that room the experience has already begun.

Jesus has introduced them that evening to his Father and theirs. The glory fills the room. This is the start of a heavenly journey that will have its consummation permanently in life after death. In just a few days Jesus would enter into that glory forever. In just a few years, so would they. And that is the same for us.

Time stood still on that Holy Night which began with the washing of the feet and the communion with Jesus through the living bread and the great cup. Why? Because the experience of eternity replaced it.

Jesus Prays for the Apostles (John 17:9-19)

Jesus proceeded to pray for his apostles. Addressing his Father he offered three petitions for them: Keep them in love. Keep them from evil. Consecrate them in truth. Each petition deserves a brief reflection here.

Keep Them in Love. Normally, we think of praying to Jesus, or to the Father through Jesus. The emphasis here is on Jesus praying to the Father for the apostles and us by extension. His first petition concerns the unity in love which the apostles must preserve. He had commanded them to love as he did, meaning they should love in such a way that they brought God into the lives of others. Their love should always have a salvation purpose. Apostolic love must always have a spiritual goal. This is no sentimental love such as romantic dreamers espouse. It is a demanding love. Often there will be little pleasure to it, rather mortal danger. James will be beheaded. Peter will be jailed and crucified. All of them will be expelled from the synagogue communities which had meant so much to them.

They will have to become a new community, the Christian church. As the pillars of this new church, they must witness unity and love. Jesus prayed to the Father “that they may be one just as we are” (verse 11). Each apostle is meant to be a sign of the unity of the church. Taken together the community of apostles themselves should constitute a collective witness of the unity which is expected of the whole of God’s people. The words of Jesus about unity have been applied today to the ecumenical movement – an excellent application – but they were first spoken to the Father about the apostles. Jesus expected unity from them and prayed, as he still does, for the unity of the apostles and their successors, the pope and bishops.

Keep Them From Evil. In the Our Father, Jesus taught us to say, “deliver us from evil.” In many ways, Christ’s prayer for his apostles sounds like the Our Father, especially this petition, “Keep them from the evil one” (verse 15). What kind of evil? Certainly not persecution. He did not choose “soft men” to be apostles. He picked a hardy lot and toughened them up spiritually during the years he trained them. When describing the eight attitudes for spiritual happiness he ended up with a daunting challenge. “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute me and utter every kind of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11).

Jesus did not pray that they be delivered from the indignities of persecution and martyrdom. He prayed that they be protected from the evil of sin. They could never be messengers of salvation if they led a life of sin. Then they would be the morally blind leading the morally blind. If they did not exhibit in their personal lives the moral integrity that resulted from the saving grace of Jesus, then their message would be hypocritical in the extreme.

A scandalous apostle would demoralize the church and cause people to fall away from faith. Sad to say, many shepherds of the church during the course of its history have indeed surrendered to sin and caused infidelity among the faithful. Jesus was not praying for saints, but for pilgrims, weak apostles who would need divine assistance to carry out the demanding mission to which they were called.

Consecrate Them in Truth. Jesus had trained the apostles to be missionaries of the Gospel. He planned to send them the Holy Spirit who would transform the meager clay of their present weakness into the full bodied life of evangelical power. The Holy Spirit would lead them to holiness. The experience would be like the Old Testament's anointing of prophets, priests and kings. The physical oil of anointing was an image of the invisible transformation caused by the Spirit. Here, Jesus as high priest was talking to his apostles as the anointed men called to identify with the holy.

When Jesus spoke here of "consecration" he was referring to holiness, a term that refers to the inner beauty of God. What quality above all has attracted men and women of every age to God? The divine beauty. What finally convinces the human heart that communion with God is the greatest of all goals? The beauty of God. Divine holiness has two sides to it: (1). The moral purity that induces a virtuous life in those who want to be identified with God. (2). The inherent attractiveness of beauty that needs no arguments to draw the heart to surrender and communion.

A snow-capped mountain peak does not need to plead its case, "Come to me and love me." The movement of the stars has never caused anyone to debate such magnificence. The boundless sweep of the ocean requires no arguments to draw attention. Nature's wonders speak for themselves and attract without force. Neither does the beauty of God once it is perceived. St. Augustine wrote that tourists will travel the ends of the earth to behold nature's magnificence, "Yet they leave themselves unnoticed. They do not marvel at themselves" (*Confessions* 10, 8)

He went on to say that we cannot hope to find God until we find ourselves. The human tragedy is to be driven outward, to lose touch with ourselves and wander far from our hearts. Such was Augustine's own life journey until he found God who drew him into divine intimacy with a passion. For him the drawing power of God was his beauty. "Too late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever now! Too late I loved you! And behold, you were within me, and I out of myself, and there I searched for you" (*Confessions* 9, 12). That beauty is another name for God's holiness. It charmed Augustine enough that for forty years of his life as a priest and bishop, he journeyed as deeply as any saint ever did into the warm embrace of God's holiness.

Such is the experience Jesus had in mind when he prayed that the apostles be consecrated in truth. He had awakened them to a sense of their inner beauty, his glory. They clearly had trouble understanding his teachings, but they were in no doubt that they wanted to be near him and follow him as his disciples. The process of consecration had already begun. Jesus prayed to the Father that it continue and that the Spirit would bring it to maturity.

Jesus consecrated holiness with truth. True holiness cannot be based on a myth or on an illusion. Jesus did not spend his years spinning useless fantasies for his listeners. He taught the truth because he knew that truth was the best nourishment for the soul. What he said about God was true. Moreover, Jesus claimed to be the living truth, meaning his evident fidelity to each human being. He was true to people. Thus he embodies truth in his person. Holiness is identity with God who is both true and faithful.

Then Jesus Prayed for Us (John 17: 20-26)

Having prayed so fervently for his first missionaries, Jesus then gazed into the future and prayed for the people who will be evangelized. The apostles will call them to belief in him – as messiah and Son of God. The outstanding gift he prayed for was unity. “That they may all be one, as you, Father are in me and I in you” (verse 21).

Why should they have this unity? That the world may believe that you sent me” (verse 21).

This unity would have two aspects.

- (1). Christians should be united to God with an intimacy like that of the Son and the Father.
- (2). Secondly, Christians should be united to one another with love, care, mercy, justice, and kindness.

Both types of unity are essential. To be united to God with no interest in mutual love for one another would be a travesty. It would cease to be real spirituality because it would prove to be illusory. A concentration on God without affection for people eventually becomes a morbid preoccupation with a self imagining it is in touch with God.

On the other hand, the quest for a fellowship group with no reference to God is equally doomed. Such people wind up in a fruitless quest for just the right, friendly group. Forever, they either expel the so-called colorless or abrasive members or else they run off to another group that seems a bit more charming and bright minded. These people are looking for clubs not a church.

Jesus intended only one Christian Church. The unity would be modeled on the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit and would reflect the love that binds the persons of the Trinity. The unity within the church would be made possible by a divine power. Today it is clearer that Christians have a moral obligation to seek the unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper. The ecumenical movement is the result of a grace given to Christians of these times.

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism has responded to Christ's call to unity among Christians. "The restoration of unity among all Christians in one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one church and one church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves as true inheritors of Jesus Christ. All indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways as if Christ himself were divided. Certainly such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature."*

But there is not only division among the churches, there is also disunity within the churches, including, Catholicism. The ascendancy of a political vision of faith has caused people to be divided along lines more common to secular states than a Christian community. The politicizing of theology, church discipline and pastoral practice threatens to scatter the people of God into new splinter groups. Playing politics with Jesus and the Christian community is a new scandal that needs to be confronted as vigorously as the old division among churches.

The relevance of Christ's prayer for unity at the Last Supper has never been more acute. Quarrels within the church weaken its witness, distract from its evangelical mission and dilute its energies. Such disputes divert the attention of pastors and parishioners from the priorities of lives that should be focused on Jesus the Savior and loving compassion for one another. Unless there is a return to a resolutely spiritual focus, the politicizing of Christians will enervate what is left of faith and eliminate what survives of love. Jesus prayed that we would be united to God and to one another in the loving power of the Spirit. In such a way did Jesus conclude his farewell address to his apostles. The majesty of the Great Sermon and Prayer of the Last Supper has never seemed more resplendent or relevant to Christian lives. We owe much to the artistry of St. John who remembered and saved these words of Jesus for our instruction and inspiration.

As the end we are drawn to silence. We gaze on that little group around the Master as they lift the final cup of wine for the last toast of Passover. The room seems too small for the greatness it contains.

The air is too soft for the ringing truths that Jesus uttered. The night too dark for the light that shines from the visible Son and the invisible Father at the table. But that is God's way, to embody the greatest reality in the simplest of settings.

The drama of the passion is about to begin.

"Get up. Let us go" (John 14:31).

*"Decree on Ecumenism," *Unitatis Redintegratio, Vatican Council II: Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, NY:Costello Publishing Co., 1981).