

IN THE WORD!

Exauldi Sunday (20 May Anno Domini 2012)
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John 17:11b-19

Jesus said: “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

What a great joy we find in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus is praying His high priestly prayer. It's called the Sacerdotal Prayer because it is a prayer to His Father for Himself, for His disciples, for the Church and for you.

I. The Son of God in the World

The prayer takes place on the evening of Jesus betrayal. He has come to accomplish His Father's will: *For God the Father has sent His only Son into the world, not to condemn it, but so that the world might be saved through Him* (John. 3:17). God has sent His Son to be the saving Word; and to accomplish this task, the Son has become flesh. This is crucial: Flesh and blood are necessary if Jesus is to be the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Word made flesh has come into the world to serve and save.

Jesus is in the world, but He's not of the world. That's obvious, for there is so much that is awesomely unnatural about Him. He's born of the virgin. He's perfectly obedient - without any sin of thought, word or deed. He lives in service to others. He performs miracles, heals the sick and casts out demons. He warns people of the danger of sin and declares to them the free gift of salvation. He's a man set apart, for He is both God and Man. Jesus sums up His ministry halfway through Matthew by saying, ***"The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them"*** (Matthew 11:5).

That makes wonderful sense. But in the very next verse, He says, ***"And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me"*** (Matthew 11:6).

Offended? Who would be offended by the One who heals and saves for eternity? But, it seems like, just about everybody is offended. When Jesus announces that He is the only Way to heaven, He's also saying that no other god (little g) can save. This angers many. When He says His work alone saves, He also declares that people cannot save themselves by their own works. This enrages some. One would think that healing and salvation would be met with thankfulness and joy, but there's more at play here. The evil one is at work, obsessively whispering that this Savior must be destroyed. The world is swimming in a cesspool of sin, and thus rejects the life saving efforts of the Savior. Consequently, these foes conspire together; and shortly after Jesus finishes His prayer in our Gospel lesson, He is arrested, He is beaten and He is crucified. The injustice is clear: Jesus is put to death solely because He is innocent, because He does speak the truth, and because He is the Son of God. He speaks the truth to save the world, and the world is violently offended by the truth of the Word.

Yet the murder of God's Son does not seal the world's destruction; the Lord uses this for the good of His enemies. As Jesus prays in our Gospel lesson, He sanctifies Himself. In other words, He sets Himself apart to be the Sacrifice for the sin of the world. He suffers that death to redeem all nations. (†) He suffers that death to redeem you.

That's the Savior in the world. The Word becomes flesh and comes into the world to serve and to save, by His life and by His death, so that you might be saved from this world.

And what is He doing in our Gospel lesson, just before His terrible suffering and death? He's not looking out for Himself. He's praying for His disciples.

II. THE DISCIPLES IN THE WORLD

Jesus prays for His disciples because, after His resurrection, He is sending them into the world, to all nations. The Father sent the Son into the world to win salvation. The Son will send the disciples into the world to preach His Word of salvation to all.

In Jesus' prayer, He prays about the gifts that He and His Father will give to the disciples for the mission ahead. The Lord gives them His name; He reveals who He is so that they might call upon Him. Also, by placing His name upon them, He declares that they are under His protection and in His keeping. When they speak, they do not speak on their own, but as Jesus' ambassadors with His authority. They speak His Word and not their own.

The Lord gives them His Word but not just to tell to others. He gives them His Word of truth so that they might be sanctified, that is, set apart from the judgment of this world. By His Word, the Lord shows them their sin and moves them to repentance. By His Word, the Lord freely gives them His forgiveness. These are some of the blessings which the Lord bestows upon His own when He sends them into the world as His apostles.

The apostles will go forth into the world. They will proclaim the Good News of freedom from guilt, healing from affliction, eternal life after death. They will preach Christ and Him crucified for the sin of the world. They will go forth, preaching the sanctifying Word, the free gift of forgiveness, so that all who hear may believe and be saved.

They will go into the world, but they are not of the world. In fact, as Jesus says in His prayer, the world will hate them. In declaring the free gift of salvation in Jesus, the apostles will also be saying that there is salvation in no other god. In declaring the works of the Savior, they will announce that no one can save themselves by their own doing. The world will hate them, and plot out their deaths.

It's tempting to look wistfully back at the first days of the Church with rose-colored glasses. The good old days! Peter preaches a sermon on Pentecost and 3000 are baptized; oh we give thanks for this, but we better not forget that Peter will be imprisoned, beaten and eventually crucified upside down. Paul goes on journeys and plants churches everywhere-once again, thanks be to God! But then he's also arrested, imprisoned, beaten, stoned and beheaded. Of the apostles, only John lives to a ripe old age and doesn't suffer a violent death; of course, this also means that he sees far more brutality against Christians than do the others. You see, there's never been a time when the Church and the world have coexisted peacefully. The world and the evil one will always conspire trying to stamp out the message of forgiveness, life and salvation in Jesus alone.

Jesus prays for the apostles because the world will hate them. We don't denounce the world for the reaction they give and the offense that they may feel; we rejoice that the Word is proclaimed to them. Sanctified by the Word of truth, the apostles want others to be set apart for eternal life. The message is so precious and saving that they are willing to die and suffer rejection so that others can hear it. Remember light shines brightest in the dark.

III. THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD TODAY

Today, the Church is entrusted with continuing the apostolic ministry. We still go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all that the Lord has commanded. This is the sole mission of the Church in the world.

As Jesus gave gifts to the disciples, likewise He gives us His gifts as well. He gives us His name. He places it on each of us in Baptism. We are under His care and protection. He reveals it to us so that we can call upon Him, trusting that He will give us whatever we ask in His name. We begin our service "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," because our Lord promises that He is present when even only two or three gather in His name. We preach in the name of Jesus: We speak His Words, not ours. We speak by His (T) authority, not our own.

The Lord gives us His Word, and with this gift He gives us His Sacraments, too. By His Word of truth, He warns of our sin, calls us to repentance, and showers forgiveness upon us. By this forgiveness, He sanctifies us. He sets us apart. He declares, "You no longer face the judgment of the world for sin; because though you were once sinful, I have died on the cross to take your sin away."

Though He has set us apart from the world, He keeps us in the world to do His bidding. In particular, proclaiming the Good News to others. We don't hoard the message of salvation for ourselves; in Christian love, we want others to hear it! Therefore, we declare the Good News that, though the world was lost in sin, the Lord Jesus Christ has suffered and died to redeem the world. We declare that He is risen again to forgive and save. We joyfully proclaim that, apart from Christ, there is no hope of salvation, not in other gods or by human works. Christ alone has died and Christ alone has risen so that all who believe in Him may be saved and have eternal life. And we make known that this forgiveness Christ has won is free, absolutely free, because Jesus' death was sufficient to pay for it all.

It's a great, and humbling, privilege to proclaim this truth of God. Therefore, we give thanks that the Lord has placed us in this world to do so.

The Lord has given you His name. He has placed His name upon you and said, "You belong to Me. I have died for you and risen again; I have washed you clean in Holy Baptism. Once you were an offense to Me; but while you were yet a sinner, I died for you (Romans 5:8). Once, in your sin, you were offended by the Gospel; but I have given you faith and opened your eyes so that you can see and rejoice in the truth."

The Lord has given you His Word. By His Word and work, you recognize your own sinfulness and need for His grace. By His Word, you understand that the world is blind in sin; and it is because of this blindness that the Gospel is offensive. And in that Word, the Lord declares to you, "Once you were blind in sin and opposed to the light. But I called you by the Gospel and enlightened you with My gifts. I am the Light of the world; and by the Word I give My Church to proclaim, I still bring light to the darkness." The Lord has given you His Word.

The Lord has set you apart - He has sanctified you by His Word of truth. By the truth that He speaks, He has saved you from the Judgment that will fall upon the world for sin. Setting you apart from the world, He leaves you in the world so that His Word might continue to be proclaimed. The Lord has set you apart-for life and salvation.

Because the world is offended by the Gospel, we are tempted to view its proclamation as a grudging obligation which we must perform as Christians. If we do so, we are letting the world place the value on the message, not the Lord. It is, in fact, a humbling privilege that the Lord entrusts to His Church. He uses us as His instruments to proclaim that there is forgiveness for sin, redemption from death, freedom from guilt and life everlasting. And, ironically, this Word that offends is also the Word that removes the offense and saves all who believe. What a joyous honor we have to spread that message as we can.

You and I have much to rejoice in today. The Lord prays for you. He gives you His name and He gives you His Word. He sets you apart for holiness, and over and above the offences of the world, He proclaims to you this saving Word: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus name, and for Jesus sake, Amen and Amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.