

Vespers Homily

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2015

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

John 17:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

These few chapters of John's Gospel have been called "Jesus' Farewell Discourse." It's a long and somewhat repetitive series of instructions and words of encouragement to His disciples as Jesus approaches what He knows to be His final hours with them. All this takes place in the upper room at what we know to be His Last Supper.

But this chapter, Chapter 17, is different. It has been called "The High Priestly Prayer." I am not sure in what sense it is "high" or "priestly," but it is a prayer in the sense that prayer is supplication.

I cannot imagine how many times in the past 30 years I have read this passage from John and missed the point.

I have been reading it incorrectly, without really considering its context. It's just been another long, repetitive, rather confusing bit of the Discourse on which I personally have had difficulty making a sermon.

Then, this time, perhaps because I have had much more time to reflect on its meaning and significance, I came to a realization that this isn't just an end to Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." This is not preaching or teaching; this is a plea, a passionate plea to The Father

for His disciples in His impending absence. It's heartfelt; there is urgency in His words. Now is the time.

It should be read in a staccato burst of short sentences; it should be read with the emotion of Jesus' loving care for his people. He knows their limitations, and He knows their strengths. He knows they may scatter like sheep when He's gone. He knows that their faith may falter, and He begs for God's care and protection for them.

It should be read this way; remember that this is a dialog between Father and Son. Pause as though Jesus' pleas are receiving an answer, but feel the emotion as Jesus feels time slipping away.

"Father, the hour has come . . . glorify your son."

Glory is the sign of the presence of God, His visible manifestation.

In Hebrew, it is called His *Shekinah*. It's God's glory, His presence, that speaks to Moses from a burning bush. It's His glory that is a pillar of fire protecting the Jews, God interposing Himself between the Jews and the pursuing Egyptians in the desert.

It's God's glory, His presence, on a mountaintop that transfigures Jesus and is reflected in the blinding brightness of Jesus' person. It's God's glory in the form of the flames of the day of Pentecost that will touch and transform those same disciples He is pleading for. To be glorified is to be taken into God's presence, to be sheltered and protected. They are glorified.

Jesus Himself is a visible manifestation of the presence of God. He says, "I glorified you on earth, finishing the work you gave me to do. Glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed." Take me home.

"I made your name known to those you gave me. They were yours, you gave them to me . . . they have believed that you sent me."

Here and now, in my presence, their faith is strong. They have seen my works and heard my words; they have seen the crowds clamoring to be near me, but when the crowds cry against me and the powers plot to destroy me, what then? When I am no longer with them, what then? Then doubts will arise and memories will fail and the world will overwhelm them. Peter will deny me; Thomas will doubt me; Judas will betray me.

“I am no longer in the world, but they are; I am coming to you.” They are not coming to you.”

“Protect them.”

“I protected them; I guarded them; I have given them your word.”

They have been faithful, and “the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world even as I do not belong to the world.” (But they are in this world.) Father, give them courage and strength and faith, above all faith. Only faith will “Protect them from the evil one.”

And then the most poignant words of all: “Righteous Father, the world does not know you but I know you and these know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

You realize, of course, that Jesus’ plea is not just for a small group of followers long ago. It’s a plea for us all. It’s a plea that you and I will have courage and strength and faith today, in this world in our time.

In His Holy Name.