

Ascension of the Lord and/or Easter 7 - Year B 2021

Jesus' prayer in our Gospel reading this morning is specific: "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours." (verse 9). These words may sound puzzling and confusing to some, and offensive and frustrating to others. Why on earth, we might ask, does Jesus not pray for, or ask on behalf of the world? After all, this is the Gospel which tells us, in words oft-repeated, that God so loved the world that he gave that same world his only Son. Why does Jesus pray only for his disciples?

Jesus draws a distinction between his disciples and the world around them. It is not unlike the psalmist's distinction between the righteous and the wicked. It is a dividing line, a border, that Christ draws between the world and the church. What distinguishes the disciples from the world is simply that they belong to Jesus and do not belong to the world. Jesus' disciples are in the world, but they are not one with it. They do not conform to the world's values, their ultimate loyalties are not tied to the world, and they refuse to bow down to the idols the world worships. What Jesus prays for us, even now, is that we should be protected from those things. Jesus' disciples are different because they belong to Jesus.

To belong to Jesus is to participate in the mission from God to the world, to embody the same love with which Jesus gave himself for us. Now, perhaps, we see why Jesus in prayer prays for his disciples rather than for the world. Christ entrusts the disciples with his own mission to the world. He does not forget or write off the world. His prayer is for faithfulness and obedience to be hallmarks of our Christian lives. It is a measure of the extraordinary responsibility he lays on those who belong to him. Not simply as individuals, but as one body.

The Ascension is a celebration of the future. By it, we see that the life we receive by faith has a spiritual future reality beyond the order of this world.

Jesus prays that his joy may be made complete in us. This happens in the midst of the world and its dangers. It is neither escaping the systems of the world nor standing up to them but laying down life before them in witness to Christ's love. Jesus does not pray that it would be easy or that we would be taken out of the world and separated from it. Instead, he prays for our protection in the world.

Our protection is not found in escaping or avoiding the dangers of the world which refuses to follow the truth of God. The protection Jesus asks for us comes through sanctification. "May they also be sanctified in truth," Jesus prays.

Sanctification is the process of being set apart according to the will of God, and grown in holiness. It neither separates us from the world nor allows our conformity with it, instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our inward transformation is brought into being. Sanctification proceeds from our new salvation life, and consists of becoming as much like Jesus as we can on this side of eternity. It separates us from the usual operating systems of the world. What is it to “become a witness to Christ’s resurrection”? It is to live according to, and reveal, God’s pattern for humanity to follow.

For this journey of sanctification, we need to be properly nourished according to our task. Now what is the food proper for this? It is the word of God, not simply the reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, but considering carefully what we hear read, pondering over it. Delight yourself in the law of God, and meditate on it day and night. In the same way, Jesus, the word of God, meets us personally in the bread and the wine. “Lord, you know everyone’s hearts.” “May [we] also be sanctified in truth.”

German reformer Martin Luther is quoted as saying, “This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not what we shall be but we are growing

toward it; the process is not yet finished but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified.”

“Holy Father, protect them,” Jesus prays. It is not enough just to hear this prayer. We are instead to follow Christ through his prayer by shaping our lives to be increasingly like his. All the protection we need as followers of Jesus is to be made holy and to be made wholly God’s. The answer to the risen and ascended Jesus’ prayer is the “amen” spoken and lived by those who follow Christ. It is our call to live this “amen”, to say, through our baptismal life, “I will, with God’s help.”.