

Sunday: Seventh Sunday of Easter

Date: May 16, 2021

Text: John 17;11-19

Title: Praying for you.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day. The 40<sup>th</sup> day after Jesus rose from the dead. On this day we celebrate Jesus' return to heaven to take up his seat at the right hand of the Father. The only Son of God, True God and True Man, fully God and fully human. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is this Jesus who the author of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of in chapter 4

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:14-15).

As Jesus returned to heaven, he brought with him the role of intercessor for fallen humanity. The High Priest of the Old Testament was the one who would intercede on behalf of the Israelite people to God the Father. In the Tabernacle and later the Temple, the Holy of Holies was where the Ark of the Covenant was found. The Ark was called the Mercy Seat. It was the earthly throne of God as he dwelt in the midst of his people.

As part of the celebration of Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies, located behind the curtain that was torn from top to bottom at Jesus' death. He would bring the blood of the sacrificed lamb and sprinkle it on the Ark. This was the means by which the sins of the people were brought before God, and the price paid for them through the sacrifice of blood. The sins were then heaped on the head of the goat, the scapegoat, and it was driven into the wilderness. The sins of the people were put away from them, never to be held against them again. The price was paid, sins forgiven, the sacrifice of the lamb was a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

Ascension Day often does not get the respect it deserves. Christians worldwide look at Easter as the most important day of the year. Then they add Christmas, Pentecost, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and maybe Holy Saturday. Ascension Day is often an after thought or treated as having the same importance as Epiphany, All Saints' Day, and for some, Thanksgiving.

But Ascension Day marks the return of Jesus to the presence of God the Father. Paul in his letter to the Philippians speaks of the humility of Jesus saying,

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5b-8).

With Jesus ascension into Heaven, he returns to his former place of glory. He completes the circle of salvation as we see, God became man, gave his life in payment for the sins of the whole world, and returned to his rightful position as Lord of All. The circle is completed, but Jesus is now fully human and fully God. As we confess in the Athanasian Creed,

Although He is God and man, He is not two, but one Christ: one, however, not by the conversion of the divinity into flesh, but by the assumption of the humanity into God; one altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

Jesus in his role as Savior of the world, assumes the role of the High Priest who intercedes on our behalf. He stands before God, pleading for us. This role is what he demonstrates in our Gospel reading today.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus stood in the midst of his disciples and prayed to the Father for them. This prayer, called the High Priestly Prayer, is a prayer in which Jesus pleads for his disciples and for all who are given to him. This includes you and me.

In the waters of Holy Baptism, we are brought into the family of believers, heirs of the kingdom of God. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans,

We were buried therefore with Christ by Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the

Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:4-6).

As Children of God, Jesus our Savior, becomes our intercessor. He becomes our High Priest, who goes before God and pleads for us. As part of the body of Christ, we are no longer of the world, though we live in this world. This is what Jesus says in verse 14 of our Gospel reading today. Luther commenting on Jesus words in the "High Priestly Prayer" John 17:14 "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" saying,

This is where all our comfort lies. That is why He repeats it so often and impresses it upon their hearts and minds. It is as if He were saying: "You feel and lament that you must remain in the world that does not want to endure you and inflicts every hardship upon you. I know well that you are exposed to danger and to worry at every moment. But let this comfort suffice you: they shall have no power over you. For you do not belong to the world but to my Father. Let the world go where it belongs, to its god, the devil. But you shall be protected and preserved, even in the midst of the world, and shall have no portion in it, until God determines the time and takes you from it, so that you may escape the misfortune and destruction that must come upon it." (LW 69:90)

We are protected and preserved by the interceding of Jesus on our behalf. Though we are sinful people, Jesus stands before the Father presenting his blood, that was shed on the cross, to atone for our sins. All our sins, even the ones we want to keep secret, the sins that are embarrassing, the sins that are blatant, the sins that reflect our self-centered, broken human nature. This includes our sins of commission and our sins of omission. Just as we confess that "is" means "is", when Jesus died for all sins, "all" means "all." All of our sins, past, present, and future are covered by the blood of the Lamb. In faith this sacrifice becomes the cleansing flood that restores us to a right relationship with God the Father. Through our High Priest, Jesus, we are made holy, even while we live in this world.

In his prayer, Jesus does not seek to have his followers removed from this world. Instead, he asks the father to keep them from the evil one. Jesus has conquered sin, death and the devil. By his death and resurrection, our Savior has

overthrown the power of Satan. The devil, continues to deceive and attack mankind, including faithful Christians. Jesus petitions as our High Priest, God the Father to protect us from the devil's assaults.

The means of protection is by keeping us in the truth. Jesus says to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." The Word of God, Jesus in the flesh, and the written scriptures are given to mankind to instruct us in the Truth. In a world that wants to redefine everything to suit its desires, we as believers are called to return to the Word of God to find the truth. Truth that does not change with the opinions of politicians, media players, and popular people. God's truth is an objective truth. It is true, whether you want to believe it or not.

God's truth says that without faith, man is condemned. Without the truth of the Gospel, people are lost. The truth, given us in Jesus is that the punishment we deserve for our sins has been satisfied by Jesus on the cross. This truth will never change. The sad thing is that the objective fact of Christ's atonement is rejected by people until by faith it becomes the subjective reality in their lives.

For you and I, the great High Priest, Jesus our Savior, has given us faith to become heirs of the kingdom. In Baptism we are given the gift of faith. In confession and absolution, we are forgiven and our sins are taken upon the Lamb of God and the price paid for our wrongs. In order to strengthen us in the truth, the Word made Flesh, gives us his body and blood to strengthen us in our faith and keep us in grace to life everlasting.

The prayer Jesus lifted up to his Father that Thursday evening is a prayer for all believers. It is a prayer of hope, it is a prayer of protection, it is a prayer for our salvation. In Christ we have the Great High Priest who keeps on giving himself for us as he intercedes on our behalf. He keeps giving himself to strengthen us in the truth. He sanctifies us with his word and with his body and blood.

May we embrace the desire of our Lord to find joy in him as he keeps us safe in the world, waiting for him to call us to be with him and live in eternal paradise with him.

Amen