

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER

Acts 1. 6-14

1 Peter 4. 12-5. 6-11

John 17. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The Last Supper has ended. The disciples are still with our Lord in the Upper Room, and they are still listening to him as he speaks. But suddenly, his words are no longer directed to them. Now, Jesus 'looks up to heaven' and speaks to his heavenly Father. The disciples (and we) are allowed to 'listen in' as Christ prays for himself and as he prays for the Church-at-large.

When he studied this prayer in the 5th century, Clement, the Bishop of Alexandria, wrote that our Lord as he prayed was acting like a High Priest for his people. And ever since then, this prayer in John 17 has been known as Jesus's 'High Priestly Prayer'.

In the Old Testament, there were three Holy Offices that were instituted by God: prophets, priests and kings. No one assumed these offices on their own. Only those who were called by God and properly appointed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit entered into such offices. Although Christ is the perfect fulfilment of all three of these offices, it his priestly office that is presented to us in this passage.

As you will remember, the work of the priest was to mediate on behalf of humans before God. Priests carried out their work at the Temple, where they would take the sacrifices that the people brought and present them to God on behalf of the people. There were 'thank offerings' that were burned, and 'memorial offerings' that were waved. But mostly, there were 'sin offerings' that were sacrificed. The priest was

the servant of God who would take the animal from the person who wanted to be cleansed of his sins, present it to the Lord, sacrifice it, throw some of the blood onto the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies and then throw some of the blood back onto the sinner. And as he did so he would say, 'the Lord has forgiven you all of your sins'. That was the work of the priest.

Although the High Priest was also a priest, he did not mediate for a man or woman and their family before God. The High Priest mediated for the whole nation of Israel collectively. The High Priest would carry out one, very special offering to the Lord every year, on the Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest alone would take a lamb into the Temple on behalf of the whole nation and sacrifice it at the altar. Then, the High Priest would take the blood of that lamb behind the curtain into the Holy of Holies, where God Himself was located, and pour it right onto the Ark of the Covenant. In this way, the High Priest would atone for the sins of the whole nation by one sacrifice, 'once for all'.

Having heard this explanation, it is not difficult for us to see why our Lord is called our Great High Priest. He is the great Mediator between humankind and God. He offers one sacrifice for the sins of the whole world to God, a sacrifice far more significant than any of the sacrifices that any of the High Priests of Israel ever made. Jesus offers himself, for he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the 'Paschal Lamb'; he is the Passover Lamb.

In the Upper Room, just before Christ gives his body over to be sacrificed and his blood to be shed, he prays. In this passage of John's gospel, we see our Great High Priest interceding for his disciples, and for all the future members of his Church who will believe.

In his prayer, our Lord prays firstly for himself. 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given to him.'

Several times previously, we heard in this gospel that Jesus's hour had not yet come. The first instance was at the wedding in Cana, when Mary told Christ to do something about the lack of wine; and he replied, 'my hour has not yet come' (2. 4). Later, when the religious leaders tried to seize our Lord and even to stone him, they were not able to do so; because 'his hour had not yet come' (7. 30).

Now Jesus says, 'the hour has come'. The great hour to which the eternal clock had been set was the hour when the Son of God would be crucified on the cross, rise from the dead and ultimately return to his position of glory in heaven. Christ prays to the Father that he will be a worthy High Priest. 'Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son.'

To 'glorify' means to give honour and dignity and respect that can be seen by others. To 'glorify' is a public thing, not a private thing. Jesus is asking to be glorified so that his glory may be seen by others. And in seeing his glory, others will worship him. And in worshipping him, they will worship the one who sent him and who is one with him.

Christ is glorified in his terrible suffering and death. This is what the Father sent the Son into the world to do, before being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven. The Son's perfect and willing obedience to do the Father's will glorifies the Father. 'I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.'

Christ then prays for his disciples, and for the greater community of faith, the future members of his Church. 'I am asking...on behalf of those whom you gave me... protect them...so that they may be one, as we are one.' Our Lord entrusts the hope for the future of his followers to God in prayer. Jesus's final words before his hour are not last-minute instructions to the disciples about what they should do when he leaves; instead, he turns the future of the disciples and the Christian Church over to God.

As we 'listen in' on this intimate conversation between Christ and his Father, we understand that the life of the Church has, and will always depend, on God's care. The Church's future is thus shown (thankfully) not to depend ultimately upon us and upon our own work, but actually upon God. St Stephen's and its members are a community for whom our Lord prays, and who have been entrusted by him to our heavenly Father. The past, present and future of St Stephen's are vitally important to God; we are in his hands and under his loving care.

This does not mean, of course, that we stop contributing to the various ministries and activities of St Stephen's (please carry on!). Our participation in the life of our church is both necessary and vitally important. But it does mean that as we contribute to the life of our parish, our God is with us; he is leading us and inspiring us; and he is in charge. St Stephen's belongs to him. He has a plan for our church, and knows what he wants to accomplish through it.

For this, we give thanks; and because of this, our hearts are filled with hope!

Amen.