

Sunday after the Ascension



Gospel *John 17:1-11*

The first part of what Christian tradition calls the 'priestly' prayer of Jesus

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said,

'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 him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 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 in your presence before the world existed.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

'And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

Homily

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

today in many churches around the world the Ascension of Christ into heaven is being celebrated. It is an event that according to the *Acts of the Apostles* (1.3) happened 40 days after the Resurrection, and that is why in some *other* parts of the Church the traditional day for the feast was kept last Thursday. One of the effects of simply using a single Sunday is that the richness of the celebration is hugely reduced. Something that is fundamental to Christian faith appears like Jesus's last curtain call at the end of the resurrection story. But it is hugely more than that. A single Sunday cannot possibly do justice to all that the ascension of Christ came to mean to the writers of the New Testament, fulfilling so much of the Old Testament and of Jesus's own teaching, not to mention its significance to other teachers of the Church in every generation since. Jesus had been 'ascending to his Father' from the moment after the Last Supper when he recognized that 'the hour' of his destiny had arrived, and his betrayal by Judas was imminent (*Jn* 12.23; *Matt* 26.45-6, *Mk* 14.41, *Lk* 24.7).

The culmination of that destiny, when he took his leave of his disciples, is the ‘the first movement’ of something unheard of. From now on the life of Jesus with God was to have *universal relevance* to every aspect of human life, the possibility would open up of *believers sharing* in Jesus’s union with the Father, and *communion* between earth and heaven would be restored. Running through all of these themes is the thing that is the special meditation of this Sunday – Jesus’s *intercession* with his Father, and our share in it.

2

Intercession literally means to stand in between, to take a step into the middle of a situation, and to intervene on behalf of another. We can think of it in direct personal terms, like when, with a small act of courage, we take on the responsibility of seeking a resolution of some estrangement between two family members or friends. Or we can think in terms of diplomacy, where someone who is trusted by all sides takes an initiative to ease or end an entrenched conflict. Or in terms of crisis, where a reputable leader might step into a complex and controversial issue which is beyond intractable and is increasingly urgent, be it globalized finance, climate change, or even, well, handling a pandemic infection. All these situations require a person to intervene, take a step into an exposed space between parties to a widening rift, to spend personal capital on finding a resolution, identifying a compromise, or a expressing a willingness to bear the cost of restoring peace.

This is what we mean by intercessory prayer. It is not a way of reminding God of people’s needs. He knows them already (*Matt 6.32; Lk 12.30*). Instead it leads the intercessor to feel the other’s needs in themselves, remembering them before God, and allowing themselves to be illuminated by the light of God’s will. Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah all give us good models of such prayer. The intercessor becomes (to quote Pope Benedict) ‘a man or woman stretched between two loves, which in prayer overlap into one desire for good’.

In the scriptures intercession was the key task of the pastors of the people – the king, the priests, the prophets. It found its fullest expression in Christ, whom St Paul calls ‘the *only* mediator between God and man’ (*1 Tm 2.5*). Throughout his life, and supremely in his freely accepted death on the cross, Christ was always making that decisive step – into the space, the no-man’s land, between God and sinners, to bridge the gap which death and sin had entrenched. And now, risen and ascended at the Father’s side, invested with all authority in heaven and on earth, he *continues* to intercede for us, as a great merciful priest (cf. *Heb 7.25*). ‘Who is going to condemn us?’, asked St Paul, ‘Remember, it is the messiah, Jesus, who died, or rather has been raised, and who is at God’s right hand and intercedes for us!’ (*Rom 8.31-34*). ‘Hear what Saint John saith’, the Prayer Book declares, ‘If any man sin, we have an *Advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’ (*1 Jn 2.1-2*)

Christ stands before God praying for us, praying for me, for you, for sufferers and sinners of any and every sort. He identifies himself with us, suffers for us, hopes for us. Thus he brings us kinship, he makes us one body with him, identifies us with him, invites us to be united with him, one body, one spirit with him.

3

The astonishing mystery of Christ’s Ascension into heaven is that whatever is true about Christ, will also true of his body; and will be true not only *here* on earth but also *there* in heaven, because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So, not only does Christ promise, ‘I am with *you* to the end of the age’; we can also cry out, ‘We are with *you* Lord, for all eternity!’ St Augustine says as much in one of his Ascension sermons: ‘Just as [Jesus] *remained with us* even after his ascension, so we too are *already in heaven with him*, even though what is promised to us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.’ Our intercession is not, then, a list of individual requests: it is always prayer by his Spirit, in Christ, in his body. The Holy Spirit gives us access to Jesus’s praying space; and our intercession expresses the intimacy of relationship which we have in Christ’s body, with our Father.

Only standing when we stand before God in Jesus’s shoes, can we intercede to God, and go so far as to pray not only for those who long to receive God’s mercy and protection, but also for our *enemies* (cf. *Lk 6.28*), and those who hurt or harm others. Intercession is an essential step to being able to love them *as God loves them* (cf. *Lk 6.27, 35*). In fact here is close interplay between prayer and love. The culmination of intercession is

not in our words spoken before God, but in living before him with the attitude – the extended, embracing arms – of the Crucified One, with every need, every wound, every sinner on our hearts.

For some years now there's been a bit of a crisis around Christian prayer, especially in those parts of the world where material goods and security are available in abundance, such as here in the West where (we have to admit) we have virtually lost the very meaning of praying. As the Church has grown smaller at least in our part of the world, so it was inevitable that the question would become more radical: not so much *how* to pray as *why*? Christians are going to have to learn how to read history again, and see that prayer is a constant part of history: from Genesis to Revelation as it were. When we pray we are not involved in an intellectual activity: we're preparing ourselves to enter a situation, our relationship with God. Intercession – whether it's praying for peace, for the poor and refugees, for persecuted Christians, for good and wise government, or for all who suffer the scourge of COVID-19, whatever it is – intercession is not useless. It teaches us to rely on the Spirit; it prepares us to be faithful to Christ and responsible towards whoever we are praying for; and it unites us to God's mercy and justice for them.

Therefore, dear friends, let us pray that the saints will show us, from their own experience of the challenges of history, and from their own experience of God's mercy, how to pray as real intercessors: how to stop, how to be alone and silent before God, and how with the grace of the Spirit to slip into the unending stream of intercession that Jesus in heaven offers *for* us, and longs to offer *with* us, eternally.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, eternal High Priest,
you offered yourself to the Father on the altar of the cross,
interceding with love for mankind.
Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
you have given your priestly people
a share in your redeeming sacrifice
and your work of intercession.
Sanctify us all, especially our priests,
to live lives ever more conformed to you,
with pure hearts, clear consciences, and consistent love,
single-minded in service to you and to the Church. Amen.