

The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus

I decided I would take a different approach to the sermon this morning. I have heard scholars say that John is the most theological of the gospels. I am not sure that is completely true, but John certainly is the most obvious in his theological statements. Sometimes it is found in what Jesus says or does, and sometimes it is found in what John says about Jesus' words or deeds. This sermon is what is known as an expository sermon, going through the passage and explaining it.

This morning's lesson is the entire chapter 17 of John's gospel. It is referred to as Jesus' high priestly prayer. In this prayer he interceded with God the Father on behalf of his people, beginning with himself, and then proceeding to the apostles and then to all those who will come after them as Christ's followers.

John begins with the phrase, "When Jesus had spoken these words." What words are those? Jesus had just told his apostles that they would be scattered and he would be left alone. Well, not really alone; the Father would be with him. He told them this so they would have peace. In the world they would have tribulation. But Jesus had overcome the world, so they could be of good cheer.

Then he began the prayer. At times it sounds like it would have been more appropriate after the Resurrection, and sometimes it seems more like something that might be said *about* Jesus rather than by him.

In the first section, verses 1-5, he prays for himself, but it seems as if the prayer is for the benefit of the apostles as much as it is really an appeal to God for anything. He announces that "the hour has come." God would already know that. He asks his Father to glorify him so that he can glorify the Father. He does not explain this in the prayer, but after the Resurrection it would be very obvious what he meant.

Very soon Jesus would be arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified. Then he would be raised from the dead. The hour that has come is this: he was about to fulfill the purpose for his

incarnation. He would be crucified, thus demonstrating his obedience to the plan of his Father to redeem the entire human race. Even though the Jewish leaders and the Romans would kill him, it would not accomplish what they sought. Instead, it accomplished God's purpose, for Jesus had power over all flesh. And through his death Jesus would provide eternal life to all who would come to realize that he was the Anointed One of God, and that God is the only true God.

His final petition in this part of the prayer is that God would glorify him in God's presence with the glory he knew before Creation. Thus John returns to his gospel's first chapter in which he proclaimed the incarnation of God's Word: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Out of all the NT authors, John is the most emphatic in his declaration of the eternal and divine nature of Jesus Christ. When Jesus has completed his earthly mission of dying for the redemption of all flesh, he will resume his eternal place in glory next to his Father.

Verse 6 begins his prayer for his closest disciples, the eleven apostles who are now left after Judas' departure. Again, even though the prayer seems directed to God, much of it seems to be largely for the benefit of the men who are hearing it and for those of us who would hear these words in the years to follow. Obviously, God already knows that Jesus has manifested the LORD's name to these men, God knows the men he gave to his Son, and he knows they have kept his Word.

But think of the strength and encouragement the words of this prayer would have given to the apostles. Jesus had just told them they would all be scattered, and now he makes this prayer declaring they are God's men. In just a moment he will declare that none of them are lost. Their desertion of Jesus at the crucial time is expected; it is part of the plan.

Everything given to Jesus is from God, and these apostles know that. Or so says Jesus in his prayer. Once again, he is reinforcing this truth in

their minds and telling the future Church that the apostles are his chosen conveyors of the Truth. They have received the words from Jesus which God gave to him.

Jesus was sent by God. The apostles know that. They believe it, even though none of them saw it happen. They were not present in heaven when somehow God the Son left the glory of heaven and entered Mary, eventually to be born as an infant. But each of them knows it to be a fact, just as the sun rises in the east. How do they know that? They have been with Jesus, and they have received his words.

Now Jesus is praying for them, and only for them at this point in the prayer. His prayer for the rest of us will be offered in a moment. Again he emphasizes the point that they have been given to him. He knows what is about to happen, and this prayer will come to mind when they have all left him. What is his is the Father's, and what is the Father's is his.

By now the apostles must have been feeling the love and power of God's presence like never before. They might have expected the wrong events in the next few hours and days, but by this point they must have had some sense that God truly was in control, and that Jesus at least was prepared for what was about to happen. I think this prayer would have bolstered their self-confidence, not because they had done such a marvelous job of being disciples, but because of the things Jesus was praying about and for them.

But what comes in verse 11 might have shook them a bit. Jesus said he was going to leave them. He was going to the Father but they would be left in the world. So he prayed for the Father to keep them in his name, that is, to keep them safe. Perhaps here Jesus was echoing the words of the prophet Zephaniah: *But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.*

Jesus prayed for his apostles, who were about to have a very difficult few days. But they would

become the humble and lowly people among the arrogant and corrupt leaders, just as Zephaniah had spoken about the remnant in Israel in his time.

Jesus offered a prayer for them that they sorely needed, if we consider some of their behavior during the three years of his ministry. He prayed for them to be one. He wanted them to be as unified in purpose and direction as he and the Father were. As Jesus had been willing to serve the Father's will, so should they become servants of one another and of God.

If you read through the book of the Acts, the full name of which is "the Acts of the Apostles," you will see that the early Church was not without controversy or conflict. But you will also read about the apostles working together to solve problems that arose. But a few things are key to their unified approach.

First, they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, they approached every problem by praying first, which would have given the Spirit an opportunity to guide them in the proper direction. Third, they were all dedicated to the same goal: glorifying God. They were not trying to raise money for a building. They were not trying to increase their numbers or steal people away from Judaism so they would look better or more theologically correct. They were not trying to turn the world upside down. They simply wanted to glorify God as Jesus had done.

Everything that happened in those early years was a result of the apostles and other Christians seeking to glorify God. The growth in numbers, the healings and the miracles, the persecution of the Church, its expansion throughout the known world – all of it was a direct result of their desire to glorify God.

Jesus points out that he had lost only one of those chosen, and that would be Judas. He says that this was so that the Scripture might be fulfilled. If that is the case, then we are left with some interesting questions about Judas. We can speculate about Judas, but it is not given to us to *know* as much as we would like.

How was he lost? Why did he betray Jesus? I personally find it hard to believe that he could have followed Jesus for three years, healed people and cast out demons in the name of Jesus, and so on, and then just betrayed him. Did he simply sell Jesus out to the authorities so they would execute him? When he found out what happened as a result of his betrayal he returned the money and committed suicide.

Personally, I think he believed his betrayal was intended to force Jesus' hand as the Messiah. I think Judas believed that when the authorities came for Jesus he would call upon those legions of angels and they would overwhelm the Romans and Jesus would be the king of a new Israel.

But that is merely my speculation, without anything to support it except for my interpretation of the passages about Judas. This statement in Jesus' prayer, that Judas was lost in order to fulfill the Scripture, also brings up questions about free will versus predestination. Did God simply know Judas would do this, or did God *determine* his actions beforehand? There is no way to know for sure, and when we are able to find out for sure someday, we will no longer be concerned about it.

Jesus had more to pray for the apostles. He said he was praying these things before leaving this world so that his joy would be fulfilled in them. It seems to me that statement supports what I said: he is praying this way as much for the apostles to hear as for any other reason. God was already going to do what his plan called for. But the apostles needed to be strengthened for their impending time of testing. The world hated them, and that would soon become painfully obvious.

But Jesus would not have them removed from the world. They needed to be in the world, because he was sending them into the world even as the Father had sent him into the world. They would need protection from the evil one, and from any and all agents of the evil one.

So what happened to that prayer? According to the legends about the apostles, all of them except John died as martyrs. Does that mean God

did not keep them from evil? No. Even though death is the last enemy to be overcome, death does not have to be evil. A good death glorifies God more than a bad life, as we saw two weeks ago in the death of Stephen.

Being kept from safe from the evil one means that we make it through life with our faith intact. It does not mean that no suffering or illness or disaster will befall us. It means that in all such things the grace and power of God will sustain us and we will reach the end of life with our faith intact.

Finally, Jesus turns his attention to those who will believe because of the witness of the apostles. Once again, this is a piece that will help them through the next few days and beyond. There are people yet to believe who must hear about Jesus from these men. Indirectly, that includes us.

Jesus prays for all these believers to be one. The reason for that desire is that it will announce to the world that God really did send Jesus into the world. Without that unity the testimony of Christians to the world is weakened.

I don't think that means that all Christians have to believe exactly the same things or practice every aspect of the faith in the same way. But when we disagree it hurts our witness if we criticize the way others believe or practice. If someone is baptized differently than we baptize, we don't tell them they have to be baptized again to join this church. Nor do we exclude anyone from the Lord's Table as long as they are a follower of Jesus. We don't break off fellowship because of their particular beliefs about how God will wrap things up at the end of this age.

I have known Christians who do such things, and I think that sort of division among believers hurts the witness of the Church before the watching world. We present a much better witness when we find common missions to work on. As I have heard it said quite a few times, theology divides but mission unites. Perhaps we need to keep our theological differences behind closed doors and conduct more mission work

together across those denominational and other “dividing lines.”

Jesus also prayed for us to have his glory. That means that we should show forth the glory of God in whatever ways we can. It does not mean that we will appear glorious, but we will show God’s glory to the world.

Another positive outcome of this perfect oneness is that it will show the world that God loves us even as he loved Jesus. That is a rather astonishing statement when you think about it. God the Father loves us as much as he loves his own Son. Now, that love does not depend on us being perfectly one with God or with other believers. It is just that in order for the *world* to see how much God loves us we need to be unified with other believers. I have my doubts about that ever happening, but who knows? Perhaps circumstances will someday force the Church to be more unified.

Jesus’ final prayer for us is that we will be with him someday in heaven, where we will behold his eternal glory. That is his desire, he said. I think we can safely believe that if that is his desire, it will happen.

I can imagine a commercial like those ones they used to have at the end of a super bowl. Someone sticks a microphone in your face on your deathbed and says, “You’ve just fought the good fight and finished the race. Your life is over. What are you going to do now?” And we can say, “I’m going to heaven to see God’s glory forever!” OK, maybe that commercial is not a great idea, but I do know heaven will be even better than Disney World.

Jesus ends his prayer saying that the world has not known God, but he has. So have these

men around him and so will the people who believe because of them. The name of God will be made known so that his love will be in them, and also in us.

After this prayer, in the next chapter, Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane.

What can we take away from this prayer? A few things stand out.

Jesus wants us to know that he has confidence in us as disciples, not because of our abilities or the strength of our faith or any such thing, but because we are following him. God will protect us from the evil one and strengthen us when we need it, even if we seem to desert Jesus for a time. In those difficult times, the times when we don’t trust God’s plan as we should, when we think it is all going sideways for us, God is still in control. Whatever it is, God knew it was coming and we can make it through with his help and grace.

Jesus want us to focus our lives on God’s glory, not our own, not the Church’s, not any group or team or even a nation. The glory of God should be our paramount concern.

Jesus wants his followers to be unified in seeking God’s glory. We don’t all have to do the same things in the same way. But working together we should be unified in glorifying God. The end result will be that the world sees God’s love in us, and that will cause many people to join in with the Christians, because every person has a need to be loved.

Let us pray for these things as Jesus did. Amen.