

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

THE PRAYER OF CHRIST

John 17:1-11

Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 4, 2008

The Gospel lesson in John 17 is one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, and certainly one of the most treasured. Some refer to it as the “Holy of Holies of Sacred Scripture,” the revelation of the inner sanctum of Christ’s heart as He bared his soul in a final public prayer to the Father before he stepped out into the night and unto the cross. It has been said by the leaders of the Reformation: “There is no voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or in earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, and more sublime, than the prayer offered up by the Son of God himself.” What a privilege it is to study this “Holy of Holies.”

Christ’s prayer divides easily into three logical, successive sections. In verses 1-5 He prayed for himself. In verses 6-9 He prayed for his apostles. And in verses 20-26 He prayed for the church in the world.

In the opening section, as Jesus prayed for himself, he prayed specifically for his own glorification. “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). And in John 17:5 He said: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence.” The glory of God is seen in the revelation of who and what He is; the more the revelation, the greater the display of his glory. Some privileged believers have experienced incomplete personal revelations of the glory of God, for example, Moses on Mt. Sinai or Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. By far the most complete revelation of God’s glory was in the person of Jesus Christ.

“Who Being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3).

“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6).

Glorification in the Cross: Jesus had already glorified the Father by the matchless perfection of his life, as he reiterated in verse 4, “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” His life was a permanent monument of Gods’ glory. He did this through his many miracles but supremely through the example of this day-to-day life.

Foremost in His mind now was the imminent glory of the cross because of the cross would be the supreme revelation of His nature and purpose. So he prayed in verse 1, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” The cross displayed God the Father because, as John 1:18 says, Jesus is the explanation or the exegesis of God. What do we learn from the cross? We see the holiness of God in the cross as nowhere else. We see the love of holiness and his hatred of sin and his refusal to compromise with it. WE also see his love of justice in his condemnation of sin, even exercising his wrath upon his Son who bore our sins. Finally, we see God’s love for us in the vast cost He paid for our redemption. If Jesus had stopped short of the cross that would have proved there is a degree of love to which God is not prepared to go for us. The cross proves there is no limit to God’s love. Jesus is “the Lamb, who takes away the sin of he world” (John 1:29). The cross was the only way we could see the infinite depths of God’s love for us.

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o’er the wreck of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

Glorification in Heaven: *“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5).* We can only dimly perceive what Christ’s glory was like “before the world began.” We know He was the Creator of a universe so large it would take a person as least fifty octillion years traveling at the speed of light to visit every star. We know He enjoyed perfect intimacy with the rest of the Godhead, that there was always a joyous coming together of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Beyond this we know very little. We do know that He “made himself nothing” (Philippians 2:7), that He set aside the exercise of His glorious existence of deity in order to plunge so low that He became a feeble creature on a floating sphere in the backwash of space, there to die at the hands of creatures whose resemblance He bore.

The Lord's return to Heaven is a ravishing and a sanctifying thought. Jesus' prayers suggest an acquired glory because He speaks of that glory as a consequence of His earth life and suffering. "Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Before our Lord was born, the angel Gabriel gave Him the prophetic name: "Jesus" (Matthew 1:21). The Son of God became Jesus at his human birth. Now He is eternally Jesus. He bears the name that recalls his glorious human life and his glorious death. Today (from our standpoint) our Lord has a greater majesty as He reigns in His glorified human body at the right hand of God. Infinite glory cannot be increased, but this glory is greater in that there is now a greater understanding by both men and angels. Jesus' prayer for glory was answered, and someday every true believer will experience the dashing ecstasy of it.

Glorification in the Church: Between the glorification of Christ in history and in Haven, there is another glorification here on earth, in His Church. Through His Church, His glory is comprehensible. The glory that was first seen in Heaven, then in Christ's life and death can now be seen in His Church. Christ is glorified in the lives of His earthly followers.

Because Christ is manifested in His church, He remembers His followers in the heart of His prayer for His own glorification. The Lord's Prayer for glory encompasses verses 1-5. The core of that prayer, in verses 2-4 refers to the Church. Specifically He draws attention to giving His followers eternal life, which He describes as knowing the Father and the Son. "As You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as 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." What is involved in knowing Christ? And what is involved in gaining a deeper knowledge of Him?

First, Knowing Christ involves knowing something about Him: This truth is terribly appropriate today. It is doubtful that even during the Dark ages there was as much ignorance in the English-speaking world as there is today regarding the Bible and the person of Christ. **Hosea** said in his day that his people were destroyed for a "**lack of knowledge**" (Hosea 4:6). **Paul** spoke of his own people as "**excluded from the life of God, because of he**

ignorance that is in them” Ephesians 4:18). Liberal theology’s de-emphasis on Bible study has left many people who say they believe the Bible ignorant of its contents and insulated from an encounter with the Christ it reveals. Today new Christians often grow very slowly because everything is so new to them, whereas years ago he newly converted already knew many of the essentials. We must learn about Christ if we are to know Him.

Second: Knowing Christ involves intimacy of relationship: The Old Testament regularly uses the word know for sexual knowledge. The idea of knowing suggests a mutual experience and exchange. Knowing Christ does not simply mean knowing something about Him but having a personal knowledge of Him. This is repeated with delightful monotony when people are truly converted. They know they know Jesus and that Jesus knows them. Now they see Christ and the Scriptures in living color.

Third: Knowing Christ means a growing knowledge: The tenses in verse 3 suggest an increasing knowledge of Christ. When Moses returned from Mt. Sinai, his face radiated the glory of God. Paul, in expounding on this in 2nd Corinthians 3:18, gave us the supreme practical application of Moses’ experience: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit,” Notice the “We...All” and not just Moses and Elijah, but all of us, including the weakest, poorest, and lowest, can reflect God’s glory. “With unveiled faces” God has taken the veil off of our hearts, and now we “reflect the Lord’s glory,” we see Him through the Word and the work of the Spirit. We “are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.” This literally says that a metamorphosis is taking place, a gradual change as we continue growing in glory. The more we look to Christ, the more we changed.

Jesus made the Father’s glory comprehensible, and we are to do so as well. We must be people of the Word, our most accurate source of knowledge about Christ. We must meditate on the cross because it is the clearest demonstration of the love of the Father. We must spend time with those who know Him, so that their knowledge will pass on to us. In doing these things we will experience the answers to our Savior’s prayer for us. Longing for Him, we must pray with Paul: “I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death” (Philippians 3:10).