

Sunday after Ascension, May 16, 2021, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 17:11b-19

"Jesus' Priestly Prayer"

Have you ever had someone stick up for you? I mean somebody go to bat for you – when you are in a difficult situation and you need somebody to stand up and be your reference, your advocate, to stand up and say that this person needs this help. Sometimes it can be in healthcare, maybe legal. All kinds of situations where they will stand up for you; go to bat for you; to intercede for you.

That is what happens in today's Holy Gospel – Jesus' prayer for His church and it is a prayer that is not like any other prayer, showing us what we are to be working on to be a great church and to really be the Body of Christ. This is a special prayer that Jesus prayed, and He must have been in agony knowing that in just hours He was about to be arrested and that it was on the night before He died. It is important to know that just before Jesus' prayer in today's Holy Gospel are words in John 16, giving us His assurance, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33) If that is not going to bat for somebody I don't know what it!

When Jesus comes to His Father in this prayer for His church, He makes a request for the church expressing confidence in you and me. In verses 20 and 21, which immediately follow today's Holy Gospel, Jesus prays, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* (John 17:20-21) The gift that Jesus gave to His disciples, they in turn gave to the world in the Name of Jesus. That gift is the untarnished faith in the Word of God, that as Jesus said – is true. It is unchangeable, it is un-twistable, and it is flat out incorruptible. Culture does not change the Word of God, but instead - the Word of God should change culture! The Word of God. Jesus has this confidence that expresses that we will carry out His message to completion and He prays that the Father will help us to do so. Isn't it remarkable that two thousand years ago, Jesus prayed for this church - this 8 year old church - and for all of the churches that exist today?

Eight times in this prayer, Jesus goes to the Father and says that He has done what He has been asked to do. Jesus prays that the work He started will be continued in His church. He asked that the work that He had begun, went to the Cross and died for - would continue years down the road and that it would be actively happening. This is a genuinely great prayer, and in it Jesus comes to the Father asking FIVE things on our behalf.

1. Jesus prays that you and I as the church will sense the glory of God, feel, experience, and know His glory. The word glory - means the visible manifestation of the power and the radiance and beauty of God Himself. I cannot help but think of the time when Moses went to visit with God, and his face just glowed. It glowed so much that he had to put a veil across it because people were amazed. (Exodus 34:29-35) Manifestation means it is

happening; it is unfolding and happening before you, you are seeing it and experiencing it. Jesus wants people in the years to come to continue to feel and sense His presence. Next Sunday is fifty days after Passover – Pentecost. I pray that the Holy Spirit visits us in a special way next Sunday as we celebrate Pentecost. Do not forget to wear something red!

2. Jesus prayed that we would not only feel the presence of God, but that we would follow the Word of God. His Word is complete and never to be changed! When the disciples received the Word of God it gave them meaning for their lives. They understood that Jesus truly came from the Father in heaven and gave them life. When we get into the Word we begin to have meaning in life and then when you can understand how the Word comes alive. It is the Word of God that satisfies us, establishes us. We need to be in the Word of God and be bathed in the Holy Spirit as we read it.
3. Jesus prayed that we would become united in the love of God. When you get the Body of Christ united in love, then God begins to do some very great things. We are seeing great things being done right in the midst of *this* body – St. Andrew's Anglican Church. Look at what God has done in the eight years of this church in this place. I honestly believe that God is not done yet!
4. Jesus prayed that the church would begin to move in the mission of the Father. The word sanctify means to make holy and to equip – to give you the tools that you need to do a job. What is our mission? To seek and save those who are lost.
5. Lastly, Jesus prayed that we would really experience God's joy. Jesus said in verse 13, *"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of joy within them."* Let me ask you - what gives a church the joy of God? When we sense the presence of God, when we follow the Holy Word of God – and do not try to make it say something that it does not, when we are united in the Love of God, and when we go forth in the mission of God, then as a body of followers of Jesus, we begin to experience the love and joy of God.

In this Holy Gospel reading, Jesus is about to be going away, and He is very much aware that His disciples are at risk. He knows that they are going to turn tail and run when He is arrested. He knows that they are going to hide and He knows that He is going to visit them on the Day of His Resurrection in the Upper Room. He knows all these things, and He also knows that the Holy Spirit is going to come upon them fifty days after Passover. The world, which hates them as it hated Him, will threaten, and abuse them. Just look at the world today and the persecution against Christians. Just look at some of the TV shows at night and how Christianity is made fun of in what is supposed to be funny TV shows. In the case of the 11 of the apostles - they kill them. They tried to kill John the apostle by boiling him in oil in Rome, but he suffered nothing from it, and so he was sent into exile, to the Greek Island of Patmos because God had a plan. It was there that God was going to give him the Revelation of Our Lord Jesus Christ – all about the “last days” – the end times. The world hates the disciples, hates Christians, and in many ways, hates us – and can be seen snarling, making jokes and tries to divert people from seeking the truth.

Like the Apostles, we do not belong to the world, but we are sent into it, and for that reason we need protecting! That is what Jesus' prayer is about. What is now needed, is for us to be kept from being pulled back into 'the world' with all its wickedness and rebellion. During Jesus' 3 years of public ministry, He looked after His disciples, and now He was turning that protecting over to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, to be teaching and leading them. He is entrusting them to the Father, who will continue the work of keeping them safe. Jesus addresses the Father as 'holy' and declares that He is '*setting Himself apart*' so that His disciples too may be 'set apart'. Now, as our high priest, Jesus is asking the Father to preserve His people – us - from evil, from the tricks and traps of 'the world'. He wants us to be His holy people in the truest sense.

What Jesus has already done for His people is to 'keep' them in the Father's Name and to give them His Word – His Holy Word. Entrusting us to the Father, will not mean a sudden change. In praying for them now, He is praying that what He has begun, the Father will gloriously complete – through His church. Some of Jesus' last words on the cross were "It is Finished." The Temple Veil was torn in two – from top to bottom –as only God could do - and at that point the Holy Spirit was coming to open our hearts. God no longer needed to be accessed through the Holy of Holies by a high priest once a year – but directly through the Holy Spirit – a precious gift that we will celebrate next Sunday, on the Day of Pentecost, wearing red, and you all will look really great in red.

Jesus' High Priestly prayer is one of the most serious things that He ever said. It is also among the most joyful and hopeful as well. I hope you will anticipate it with joy and with thankfulness, filled with gladness and with thanksgiving. Please remember the words that Jesus spoke, "*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*" (John 17:20-21) Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you continue to lift us up and intercede for us!