

Sunday of the Ascension of the Lord

John 17:20-26; Psalm 97; Acts 16:16-34; Rev. 22:12-21

John 17:20-26 concludes the “High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus that occupies the entirety of the seventeenth chapter and thus ends the final teaching of Jesus that extends from chapter 13 through 17.

In his prayer, Jesus reminds both God and his listeners that with these final acts of betrayal, trial, scourging and crucifixion, he will have completed the work God had called him to do (17:4). That work was essentially to create an alternative community to the domination system Israel had become under its religious/political leaders (17:2-3, 6). This relational community does not embrace the values and standards of the systems of domination of Israel, Rome or the world. Rather, they are centered on living in unity with God and each other because of the redemptive work Jesus has done in their lives (17:7-9). Now, as Jesus leaves them through death, they are to go out into the world of the domination systems, living out and modeling the kingdom life of God’s alternative society, the kingdom of God (vss. 10-14).

Jesus’ High Priestly prayer stresses that his disciple community, his “beloved community” is distinct – profoundly distinct – from a society that accepts and even endorses systems that dominate – political forces that oppress, economic entities that exploit, religious systems that control – all of them driven by a lust for greed, accumulation and power. The Christian community is created by Jesus to be the very opposite of such domination.

But they are not to maintain their life together of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and dynamic corporate relationship with God by withdrawing from this surrounding, dominating culture. They are not to be taken “out of the world”. Rather, they are to enter into it, be engaged in it, come up against the very evil of it (even the personified “Evil One” of it). Just as Jesus was sent into the world of domination to expose it for the sham that it is, so the Christian community is to do the same, relentlessly proclaiming the truth and being “sanctified” (or set apart) as the living example of the truth of that alternative culture that they are to live out before the world.

In today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus then moves his prayer beyond those who have followed him during his lifetime to broaden the scope of who makes up the Kingdom of God. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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” (17:20-21).

This community – the Christian community – is not made up exclusively of those who are surrounding Jesus on that Maundy Thursday when this prayer was prayed. That community consists of a “great host” yet unborn who will hear Christ’s call to embrace the life-style of a relational community and will make up an alternative reality down through the centuries which – by its very existence – will be a witness against every age’s dominant culture of greed and power-mongering. This community will create one indivisible body over countless centuries because it will be a reflection of the unity of the Father and of the Son (17:20-24)!

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (vss. 25-26).

Here, indeed, is the power of this community that will guarantee that it will always stand over against the dominating culture, calling it to accountability and remaining its embarrassment! The Christian community is a “beloved community”; it is one that has experienced and keeps on experiencing the redemptive, transforming love of God in Christ. It is a community in which each of its individuals has experienced and keeps on experiencing the redemptive, transforming love of God. They “know” God! And they “know” God because they “know” Jesus. And Jesus “knows” them – down through the countless centuries. And thus, God “knows” them as well with a knowledge, not simply of intellectual perception but of personal and intimate relationship.

With such power at work in their midst, the beloved community as a whole will never be seduced away by the commitment of the systems to greed, domination and power! They may be tempted. Some may even yield to that temptation. But the Body of Christ, in its entirety as the “beloved community” will remain “in the face” of the systems. Thus, Jesus can rest in the reality that “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do” (17:4)!

Psalm 97 praises God for the glory of God’s reign. The psalm is divided into two sections, the first being a description of God’s reign upon the earth (97:1-9), and the second section dealing with God’s expectations for those who bear allegiance to him (97:10-12).

It begins, “Yahweh is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightnings light up the world, the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Master of the world, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him. Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments, O God. For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods” (97:1-9).

This psalm is centered upon giving glory and praise to God’s reign upon the earth. It deals with the creative power of God at work upon the world (“his lightnings light up the world – i.e., storms and fire; “the earth sees and trembles” – i.e., earthquakes; “the mountains melt like wax” – i.e., volcanic eruptions). But it also deals with God’s work within the nation as that nation engages its political, economic and religious life (“let the coastlands be glad” – i.e., pagan nations along the coast should revere Yahweh; “righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne” – i.e., the nation and its people is judged according to whether it is acting both justly and mercifully toward the poor, powerless and marginalized; “all the peoples behold his glory” – i.e., the worship of the nations must be centered on Yahweh; “all gods bow down before him” – i.e., Israel’s commitment to Yahweh should dominate the earth). The psalm’s emphasis is on what God has done for Israel, particularly in its wilderness wanderings and in its conquering of the Promised Land. It does not mention the Torah explicitly, but its presentation of God’s

expectations for Israel and for the world conform with the demands of justice and the building of public life (the economics, politics and religion of the people) that permeates Torah!

The psalm ends with an expected response from Israel for God's choosing of that nation as God's vehicle for the transformation of the world into God's ideal. "Yahweh loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked. Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in Yahweh, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name" (97:10-12).

When God comes to the earth, the Psalmist is declaring in this section of Psalm 97, those who are just in their actions and committed to the realization of God's society upon earth have nothing to fear! Instead, they have much to gain in Yahweh acting to bring God's power and love to the earth. Thus, it will be the humble, the poor, the minimized, the ostracized, the powerless who will most welcome his coming, for they will have the least to lose. On the other hand, those who are powerful, who rule, who shape a society will be most threatened, for both their position and their control will be at risk as God establishes his reign upon the earth. So, the Psalmist declares, God's coming will not be good news to everyone, but only to those "who hate evil". For such as these, God will "guard the lives of his faithful and rescue them from the hand of the wicked"!

This is a most fitting psalm for the celebration of Ascension Sunday!

Acts 16:16-34 is an extremely political story, but that reality gets obscured because of two sentences in the story that divert the reader from what the story is actually about into solely an evangelistic message. Those sentences are: "(The jailer) said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"" (16:30-31). Let's look at the actual story:

Paul the Apostle and Silas are in Philippi, beginning the building of a church around the household of Lydia, a wealthy merchant. Each day, Paul and Silas go to the town square to proclaim the gospel. On their way each day, they are accosted by a slave woman who can foretell the future and who is being exploited by her owners who charge considerable sums for her to tell people's fortunes. This possessed woman, on seeing Paul and Silas, follows them, crying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation" (vs. 17). Paul finally becomes annoyed with her and says to her possessing spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (vs. 18). And it does!

The owners, deprived of their source of income, are enraged and create a riot. They bring Paul and Silas to the Roman magistrates who strip off their clothes, beat them, and throw them into jail. In doing so, these magistrates have broken the Roman law – and gravely! Paul is a Roman citizen, and Roman law provides him due process, protecting him from public humiliation, flogging and jail *until the accusations made against him have been proven in a court of law!* To guarantee that a Roman citizen's rights were not accidentally ignored, Roman law *required* that a magistrate had to ask *every* person accused of a crime whether or not he was a Roman citizen.

But the magistrates assumed Paul isn't a Roman citizen, and therefore they neglect to ask that legally required question.

Paul isn't going to let these magistrates get away with such a serious oversight. Thus, his confrontation of them begins. Paul and Silas are placed into stocks "in the innermost cell" of the Philippian prison. There, they pray and sing hymns. The jailer and the other prisoners listen to them, wondering what kind of mad men these are – and perhaps the jailer thinks, "How foolish these fellows are, praying to their God. Do they think that somehow He will rescue them?"

God does rescue them! "Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened" (16:26).

With the prison destroyed, the guard fears his prisoners have escaped. Roman law required execution for a guard who allowed his prisoners to escape. So the Philippian jailer draws his sword, intent on saving face by committing suicide. But Paul saves him, crying out, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (16:28)! The guard, grateful, brings Paul and Silas out of the prison (the Bible doesn't tell us what happened to the other prisoners), takes them to his home, bathes them and tends to their wounds.

Can you imagine the state of mind of this jailer? To say "his mind was blown" would be putting it mildly. In just a few minutes he went from scorn to incredulity to fear to the decision to kill himself to relief and gratitude. No wonder he asks of Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So "he and his entire family were baptized without delay . . . (and) he had become a believer in God" (16:33b, 34b).

Why is such attention paid in the story to the Philippian jailer? One reason, of course, was to tell of his conversion. But the second reason was to explain what caused the jailer to move from being simply a jailer doing his job to becoming a most forceful advocate for Paul and Silas before the Roman magistrates. The change of role of the jailer is the connecting link in the story between the events of Acts 16:19-23 (before Paul and Silas are thrown into jail) and 16:35-40 (after Paul and Silas are released from jail).

The next day, the magistrates send instructions to the jailer to release Paul and Silas (who are now under house-arrest in the jailer's home). The jailer comes to Paul, bearing the good news. He is not prepared for Paul's reply.

"But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, *men who are Roman citizens*, and have thrown us in prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves!'" (16:37)

The jailer is stunned. He wasn't aware that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. What a severe mistake the magistrates have made – a severe enough mistake that if Paul prosecutes them, they will lose their position and authority in the Roman Empire! Now thoroughly on Paul and Silas' side, the jailer goes to the magistrates, tells them the bad news and insists that the magistrates come to his home and publicly apologize (16:38-39). And the magistrates do it! They "eat

humble pie”! They come to Paul and Silas and publicly apologize! And then they nicely ask the two to leave the city. Paul, in essence, says to the magistrates, “We’ll leave when we get around to leaving.” And in no hurry to leave, Paul and Silas go “to Lydia’s house; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed” (16:40).

This story is a story of “in-your-face” confrontation! It is a confrontation of the economic forces of Philippi who would seek to make profit off a possessed slave girl. It is a confrontation of the Philippian jailer and the laws of the state that would make him attempt suicide. But most of all, it is a confrontation of the magistrates of Philippi – the official representatives of the Roman Empire in that city. It is the public humiliation of these magistrates. It is an action that sends a message, loud and clear, to the Roman system throughout the world – “Don’t mess with us Christians! We know the Roman law as well as you. And we will use that law to its fullest extent to protect ourselves and to serve the cause of Christ. So be careful when you deal with Christians. Be very careful!” And that message wasn’t lost on Rome, as Acts 21-28 clearly demonstrates!

Revelation 22:12-21 concludes John’s magnificent vision of the city (thus, the world) as God intends it to be. The indicators of what God intend the city of God to be like is quite obvious. This will be a city fully under God, a religious environment where all will be in relationship with God and thus in shalom with each other (Rev. 21:3, 6-8, 22; 22:3-4). God’s city will also be one practicing an economics of plenty, equitable distribution, and security (Rev. 21:13-14, 18-21, 25-27; 22:1-2). This will include a transformation of the natural order so that death, illness, grief, and pain will be gone (Rev. 21:4, 25). Finally, the city will have a political order which is centered in God with room for everyone, a city whose political life will be completely just and in which everyone will play a part in the city’s governance (thus it will be democratic; Rev. 21-24-25; 22:5). This will include a centralization of all international affairs in God’s city as all governments of the world live in peace and under the authority of God (Rev. 21:24-25). This is as God intends his city to be.

In the New Jerusalem, where all live under the authority of God and the city exhibits the characteristics of the quality of life recorded above, what has become of that city’s structures and systems? Obviously, they continue. The city is formed around its religious, economic and political systems – just like the city of today. But these are transformed systems, transformed by being centered in God and in the Lamb.

And what of the interior spirituality (the “principalities and powers”) that inhabit and control these systems? What happens to them? Given the frequent references to the angels of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:9, 15; 22:1, 6, 8-9, 16), one must recognize that the principalities and powers remain a part of the city’s life. But God transforms the powers, for here they are in the service of God, and consequently, of the people of the city (Rev. 22:9). This perspective would certainly confirm other Scripture passages that would indicate that the principalities would be redeemed and returned to their rightful role in the service of God and humanity in the city (Rom. 8:19-21; Phil. 2:10-11; Heb. 12:22). So the systems and the principalities of the city of God remain intact, but are freed from the corrupting power of Satan so that they might become the servants of the

people and therefore the servants of God. They are able to become that which God intended them to be and created them to be in every city of the world.

The author of Revelation wrote this book in order to enable God's people to see what the city wholly given over to Satan and what the city given over to God both become, so that we might understand the eventual and inevitable outcome for both cities. Thus Revelation is meant both as a warning and as encouragement: warning to those who would serve the cause of evil in the city, and encouragement to us who seek to live out the Gospel in an urban world.

The vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22) and the horror of the Satan-filled Babylon (Rev. 17-18) are given to the church in order to encourage us in our ministries. We continue on in an unjust and uncaring world, sometimes wondering if the work we are doing is having any effect at all. For all our effort, our presence, our prayers, our words of good news, our deeds of mercy and justice, and our work for the liberation of the victims and the seduced of our city's systems seem to bear little fruit. And we cannot help but wonder whether it is worth it all.

The book of Revelation proclaims to us that what we do is worth it! We are among the faithful company of God's people who are waging war against the powers of darkness in our world – and we will win! God is at work in our city through us. Christ will continue to work through his people until that day when God will create that new city where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, and the city will become the Holy City of our God. The kingdom of God for which we work and upon which we focus our prayers really will arrive in all of its totality – someday!

“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. . . . I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you the testimony for the churches. . . . Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:12-14, 16, 20).

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle C Oeasteride Asc Sun.doc)