

Jesus' Prayer
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

¹After 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, ²since you have given him authority over all people, * to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ⁶I 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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

John 17:6-19 (NRSV)

Introduction and Comments:

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day when we remember and honor those who have died in service of this nation. It is also a time of reflecting on current situations; wherein, this nation is still sending young men and women into harm's way in service of its interests, although I fear not always in service of our founding ideals. As part of this remembering and honoring our fallen service men and women, the nation must also remember to honor its promises to stand by, protect, comfort, and provide for the disabled and the families of the fallen.

Sermon:

As we all know, John's Gospel is nothing like those of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. John, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which share much in common, used his own unique sources to explain Jesus and his relationship with God to his audience. Scholarly consensus is that the issues that prompted the author to write his gospel were conflicts within a highly cosmopolitan, Jewish community or synagogue, concerning Jesus as the Messiah and his nature as Messiah-Son of God. I would add

that a pervasive Roman hostility toward Christianity also figured prominently in the author's context at the time.

The synagogue was a place where immigrant Jews could gather and continue not only familiar religious practices but enjoy a society of relatives and others of common heritage, settle internal disagreements, and serve as a cohesive force to lobby for protection and their privileges within the greater society. Thus, the synagogue shared much in common with ancient Roman and Greek social clubs, guilds, burial societies, and cultic associations. (Meeks 34-35) However, in the highly collective mindset of the ancient world, the synagogue, in effect, represented the Jewish world - "the world" outside of Palestine and Jerusalem. To be kicked out of the synagogue was in effect, to use a science fiction term, made to live off-world, alienated from all that gave one identity, belonging, safety, and social and familial support.

Often when we read John and his references to the "world", we envision him talking about the universe, the planet, or all the people on the planet across time, including us. Although John used the Greek word "Kosmos" that we understand as the universe to talk about the world, we must be careful to check the context of each of his uses. In the ancient world, as I have said, a person's world was all about relationships not geography, national boundaries, or political allegiances, the planet, and especially not about people considered not "of-our-world."

Thus, a person's worldview, including what we would call their politics, economics, and religion was primarily embedded in family - past, present, and future - and one's village or ethnic community relationships. So, when we hear John talking about "the world", we should check and see if he was talking about the world of "others"; that is, the world of the non-Jews, or was he referring to the "world of the Jews", in which his Jesus community was embedded. This is primarily his reference for the world in our passages this morning. In summary, we capture much of the context and dynamics of John's Gospel in a familiar saying of someone living in their own world - John lived in his own world.

So, let me give you my interpretive paraphrase of our scriptures this morning with the addition of verses 12-19 within these cultural understandings.

Jesus said Father I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on the behalf of greater Judaism that will not receive your Spirit of Truth, but on behalf of those of our Jewish faith whom you gave me, because they were, are, and will always be members of your elect. As Jews, we are all yours and I have been honored in and by them. And now I am no longer going to be alive in this life or our Jewish world with them. In fact, I too am now an outsider, but they must remain here, alive and in their world of the Jews, while I am coming to you. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these truths to these who are of this world of Judaism so that they may have my joy in relationship to you made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and a greater portion of the world of Judaism has hated them because they do not belong to the Spirit of Truth, just as I no longer belong to that same Jewish world. I am not asking you to take them out of their Jewish world or community, but I am asking you to protect them from the evil one - the spirit of non-truth, concerning me and our relationship within their Jewish communities. They, as I, no longer belong to that world of Judaism that will not receive your Spirit of Truth. Sanctify them, set them apart, define them as born anew as Jews in this truth. As you have sent me into the world of Israel, so I have sent them into that same world. And for their sakes, as I have set myself apart unto your word and truth, I did this so that they also may be set apart in that same truth, so that in you, Holy, Patron Father, as you have honored me, so honor them in your protecting, encouraging, and sustaining Spirit of Truth.

The picture I want to paint with my paraphrasing is one where we see those Jesus-confessing Jews in John's community as living in a precarious situation and in dire need of divine help. Not only were they experiencing what we would call a social crisis but for many a crisis of faith. Their questions would have been, do I stick with my Jesus community or return to my traditional Jewish community? Or, do I try to do both and live in a gap of ambiguity and anxiety? Some Jews, including the author of John's Gospel may have been kicked out of their Jewish world - exiled off world, as it were. Others were extremely anxious as they secretly related to John's community of Jesus-confessors. In addition, at the time John wrote, the Roman Emperor, Domitian, along with other Romans, were not all that keen on the Christians and saw them as a new, upstart religion that had betrayed their ancestral religion and its god.

I must mention that overall, the Jews enjoyed a beneficial relationship with the Romans that went back to Antipater, Herod the Great's father, forty something years before the birth of Christ. In this relationship, the Jews had been granted certain privileges and exceptions not extended to other peoples. Those privileges in the main would have included exemption from military conscription, although many Jews did serve in Roman armies. Also, the Jews throughout the empire could have observed the Sabbath, Jewish religious festivals, enjoyed the protection of their holy scriptures, and been exempted from participating in pagan festivals, and exempted from worshipping the Emperor as a god. Additionally, they were exempted from paying tribute every seventh year and allowed to keep it in Jerusalem - Jews in the Diaspora could send an annual temple tax to Jerusalem. These monetary exemptions and considerations all went away after 70 C.E.; in fact, a tax, *the fiscus Judaica*, was imposed on Jews, empire wide, to reimburse the Romans for the cost of the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 C.E. This taxation eventually failed and was repealed.

The Jews, however, were to venerate or pray for the Emperor and prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the priest offered sacrifices to God twice a day on behalf of the Emperor, *qua* Roman Empire. So, it is in this context of the more traditional Jews denying Christians as an entitled sect within Judaism and labeling them heretics for other Jews, that we should hear what has become known in John's Gospel as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer for his disciples and those who would come to believe into Jesus through their efforts.

Much of Christianity has come to understand that with emerging rabbinical Judaism's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and the deviant labeling of his followers, the Spirit of Truth opened up and expanded its power and presence to the non-Jewish world, the world of the "others." Therefore, across the ages, the Spirit of Truth sent by God at Jesus' request has helped believers understand God's redeeming work in Jesus and to sustain and help them maintain their communities of faith, be they Jew or non-Jews.

I personally believe that today in our nation - shall I say our Western Christian world - with our highly, overrated sense of individualism and our moral and ethical relativism, we are experiencing not only a national social crisis but a crisis of faith. This social crisis can be seen in what we know as traditional Christian values, especially the more conservative and traditional forms of Christianity, being attacked in the media and from the non-believing, secular world, but also from within the ranks of modern Christianity. Some of the attacks are subtle in that Christianity as an institutional entity and its people's personal faith and beliefs are simply ignored, discounted, considered irrelevant, except at election times. Other attacks are more straightforward, aimed at portraying Christianity as an extension of the Western World's bullying imperialism or an old-world bromide for the uneducated, undereducated, unsophisticated, or existentially fearful.

In a nation that has printed on its coinage "In God We Trust", many people today are afraid to say "In God We Believe" without certain qualifications lest they be suspected of being a bigot, a

racist, homophobic, or anti-feminist. I have heard Christians, when they do identify their faith, do so apologetically by saying they are progressive Christians, not fundamentalist or evangelical. I once had a woman tell me when she learned I was clergy, that she and her husband were Christians too, but not those religious types. I think to offer such qualifications guts a person's faith and portrays them as skirting the edges of some ill-defined religious philosophy, or hedging their bets against death.

Our crises of faith, which may be a crisis of no-faith beyond our faith in science and technology, has given rise in the minds of many to a form of scientific, universal humanism. I think another ingredient in our crisis of faith is the pressures of a politically correct, multiculturalism brought on by a global economy, which seeks to down-play or homogenize all religions or any other values to the point they will not interfere with business. Although, across history this is nothing new, it is just that such forces have finally reached an attention grabbing and more obviously neutralizing effect on traditional American Christianity.

Folks, nowhere in our scriptures, Old or New Testament, do we hear that either Judaism or the Gospel of Jesus the Christ are to be catalyst for blending all the world's religions. Our scriptures indicate that God's intent is to bring all people of the world in to the will and ways of God. God's ways and means of doing this is through the human capacity to love in response to God's revelations of love in Divine Law and in the Christ. Methods, means, and timing may be up for grabs, but the intent is not. This is not to discount the good in other religions but to see good in their God's revelations of care and concern for all peoples and life on this planet. However, if love of others, love of self, love of creature and creations, and love of God are not at the heart of a person's religion, it is sorely lacking.

If you have experienced unpleasant reactions when admitting you are Christian, or like many in John's community, you are apprehensive about confessing your faith for fear your church or denomination may disavow you or the government may withdraw various exemptions and privileges if your Christian voice threatens the status quo, then you need to hear our scriptures today as bridging the limits of an ancient, closed Jewish community to hear Jesus across the ages praying for us.

I may not agree with the theologies or Christologies of some other Christians or desire fellowship with them, but by God and in God, they are my brothers and sisters in faith. They may be right and I wrong, or I right and they wrong about things we will all have to die to prove, but the Spirit of Truth sent from our Heavenly Parent, binds us together in a holy, confessing family of faith in Christ. And, I will honor my brothers and sisters in Christ and defend with my life their right to believe or not to believe as I do. However, I will also defend with my life my right not to have anyone else's religious, political, or lifestyle choices supplant mine or my Christian community's choices. Furthermore, I will always strive to be gracious in explaining and defending my values and points of view, and would hope and expect the same in return from those who differ or disagree.

And, I feel some degree of sadness and, yes, to be frank, a certain degree of contempt for those modern folks who believe they must apologize and qualify their faith as Christians. To such, I would say that those who stand for nothing except their own individual safety, comfort, and a sense of belonging to a nebulous majority that is obviously cannibalizing the moral and ethical underpinnings of this nation and its people, you are aligning yourselves with something that is doomed.

The Apostle Paul, writing much earlier than John, puts it this way:

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual (or, reasonable) worship. ²Do not

be conformed to this world (or, this age), but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect (or, *what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*).⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12:1-2;4-5, RSV)

Yet, I am reluctant to include those who are Jesus apologizers and qualifiers, or sycophants of modern anti-Christian multiculturalism, humanism or, scientism, as contributing significantly to the body of Christ and definitely not to the transforming of the worlds of human hearts and minds. But, you know, I could be wrong. I could be living in a gap of ambiguity, a time of transition, when the way I understand the world and the gospel is passing to make way for a new world of insights, revelations, and community in God. I don't think so, but I could be wrong.

No, I believe that Jesus prayed that all those who believe in him, then and now, be endowed with the Spirit of Truth, and they are to live by that Truth, confess that Truth, and proclaim that Truth, come hell or high-water across all ages in all worlds. Christians are to do this knowing that God did and will honor Jesus' prayer for his disciples, ancient and modern.

I close with another passage from the Apostle Paul:

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (Romans 8:31)

Bibliography

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