

7th Sunday of Eastertide (Ascension Sunday)

John 17:1-25; Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11.

John 17:1-25 is the closing chapter of the “Farewell Discourse” of Jesus which interrupted the flow of the narrative of Jesus’ last days at chapter 13. This final chapter takes the form of a prayer spoken by Jesus, which summarizes much of the message of the Gospel of John. It is a prayer essentially for the community of disciples whom Jesus will leave behind when he dies.

Jesus tells us, in this prayer, that with these final acts of betrayal, trial, scourging and crucifixion, Jesus will have completed the work God had called him to do (17:4). That work was essentially to create an alternative community (17:2-3, 6), a body of disciples who do not embrace the values and standards of the systems of domination of the world, but of 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 dominating systems, living out and modeling the kingdom life of God’s alternative society, the kingdom of God (17:10-14). Jesus then makes this profound prayer:

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:13-18).

Jesus’ disciple community, his “beloved community” is distinct – profoundly distinct – from a society which 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, dominance 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 (a life of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and dynamic corporate relationship with God) by withdrawing from their surrounding culture. They are not to be taken “out of the world”. Rather, they are to enter into the world, 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 which they are to live out before the world.

“I ask not only on behalf of them, 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 at that Last Supper so many centuries ago. That community consists of a “great host” yet unborn who will hear Christ’s call to embrace the life-style of a relational community. They 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 – down through countless centuries – 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” (17:25-26).

Here, indeed, is the power of the community that will guarantee that it will always stand over against the dominant culture, calling it to accountability and remaining its embarrassment! The Christian community is a “beloved community”; it is one which has experienced and keeps on experiencing the redemptive, transforming love of God in Christ. It is a community in which each of its individuals who together make up that community have experienced and keep 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 of intellectual perception, but of personal and intimate relationship!

With such power at work in their midst, the beloved community will never be seduced away from each other by the commitment of the systems to greed, domination and power! Rather, the Church, Jesus declares, will remain “in the face” of the systems. Thus, Jesus can rest in the recognition that “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do” (17:4)!

Acts 1:6-14 is the Acts lesson for the 7th Sunday of Eastertide, because that is the Sunday closest to Ascension Day – the day on which Jesus ascended to heaven, according to the Gospel lessons and the book of Acts. The Acts account of the Ascension is meant to dovetail into the same account as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24:44-53). One cannot be fully understood without the other because the author of Acts (Luke) meant for that book to act as an extension of the Gospel of Luke as the disciples picked up the mission of Jesus and carried it forth into “Jerusalem, into all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Gospel of Luke is dominated by the theme of God’s kingdom (it is the stated focus of 38 stories in that gospel account). In Luke, Jesus is committed to the bringing in of the kingdom of God. This kingdom will bring in its wake a grand reversal in which poverty and systems of domination will be eliminated and humanity will become all that God intended it to be. This reversal will occur through the intervention of Jesus as the one bringing about jubilee. Through his life and ministry, his empowering of people, his confrontation of the systems, his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus will set the stage for the resurrection of humanity into the world as God intended.

And that to which Jesus is called, his followers are also called. When Jesus proclaimed in Luke, “The kingdom of God is among you,” he was indicating that God had already planted the seeds of the kingdom both *in us* and *in our midst* (the double meaning of the Greek in Luke 17:21). So it then becomes our responsibility to carry on the ministry he initiated. That is the message of Luke’s companion work, the *Acts of the Apostles*, which demonstrates the Christian community living out the jubilee in their life together (see Acts 2:1-47; 4:32—5:16; 11:29-30; compare I

Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor. 9:1-15; Gal. 2:1-10) and carrying the good news of God's kingdom throughout Israel (Acts 1:1—8:3), Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), the Gentile world (Acts 8:26—21:16) and finally to Rome (Acts 21:17—28:31).

The Acts lectionary lesson for today centers on Jesus' final meeting with his disciples, as he commissions them to their new mission. That commission is "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The task of the church, as commissioned by Jesus in Acts, is to be Jesus "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". Their task is to be a witness. Witnessing is a primary emphasis in the book of Acts (stated 18 times in 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20, 33; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 18:5; 20:21, 24; 22:15, 18, 20, 23; 26:16; 28:23).

This is an appropriate response to kingdom work in the Roman Empire. There were realistic ways the church could work for God's Kingdom in the Roman Empire, and then there were ways beyond that church's practical political capacity to do. A Christian and the church could witness to the kingdom, could live out the kingdom in their individual and common life-styles (Acts 2:43-47), could both practice kingdom economics and encourage a wider practice of such economics (Acts 4:32-35), could practice within their midst a political order of justice and compassion and could proclaim an alternative vision of a society free of political domination. But what they were not permitted to do was to work politically for the kingdom. Those Christians who were Roman citizens could use their citizenship for the benefit of the church and to protect themselves (as did Paul). But unless they were of noble Roman birth, they would never be permitted to enter the world of political decision-making, and therefore could not reform the Roman system from within.

Today's lesson continues with Jesus' ascent into the heavens. Unlike all of the other accounts of Jesus' ascension, however, Luke adds in his Acts account something that appears in no other text. Luke tells us, "While (Jesus) was ascending and (the disciples) were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven"" (Acts 1:10-11).

"Why are you looking up into heaven? This same Jesus will return". Why is this story included by Luke in this account in Acts? It is there in order to call the newly-birthed church to its mission, a mission that is not "gazing into heaven" awaiting with anticipation the return of Jesus or speculating on his second coming. Rather, they are to get about the business of working for Christ and His Kingdom in the world as it is.

Verses 10-11 have a double meaning. First, they are spoken to assure the disciples that Jesus will return. The Christians needn't worry about that fact. Second, those words are spoken to redirect the Christian's gaze and, consequently, his or her actions. Those who follow the Christ are not meant to go through life "looking up into heaven" and endlessly speculating on Christ's return or on any other points of theology for that matter. Rather, they are to center their efforts on proclaiming and acting out the kingdom upon the earth. They are to be a mission people, not a speculating people. God will act to have Jesus return when God is ready to do so. You can

trust God to take this action without our encouragement! Meanwhile, our task is not to keep on “looking up into heaven” but to get about the work God has given us: working for Christ and his kingdom here on earth!

That this is clearly Luke’s intent is captured in the final words of this story. “Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (vss. 12-14). The earliest of all Christians gathered together, forming the first Christian community in imitation of both the earlier disciple band of Jesus and the jubilee community of ancient Israel (Lev. 25) that so sought to redistribute wealth and power that no one could gain the ascendancy or use the community for his own personal aggrandizement. Thus, the earliest Christian community began, at its very origins, to shape itself into the kind of society Jesus sought to build and thus prepare itself for the day that it would go into all the world preaching and acting out Jesus’ “upside-down kingdom” for the world to embrace!

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35 is a puzzling psalm. Rather than having a single, unifying message, it seems made up of many disparate parts (e.g., praise of God, rehearsal of the salvific acts of God toward Israel, a commitment to the poor and exploited, and the carrying out of a most bloody and violent war. One of the elements that demonstrate the disparity of the psalm is the many names that God is called, which is a rare occurrence in the Psalms. Thus, God is called in this psalm Elohim, El (both of which would be translated “God”), Yah and YHWY (“Lord”), Yah Eloihim (“the Lord God”), Shaddai (“the Almighty”), the Father of orphans and protector of widows. Consequently, there are many biblical scholars who propose that the psalm is actually not one psalm but an amalgamation of bit parts that found each other and adhered together into the document we have today. As is common with the lectionary, the most “juicy” parts of the Psalm (vss. 11-31) have been eliminated from its public reading so that all mention of violence is removed from that which is presented so that Sunday worshippers are not scandalized! Of course, such elimination distorts the essential message of this psalm.

In its present form, Psalm 68 is a triumphal psalm, a hymn that was meant to be sung by the Israelite people as they processed in solemn assembly into the Temple on a feast day. It is meant to celebrate God’s protection of Israel both in its past and in its (then) present. The theme of the psalm is set in its first verse: “Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him” (NRSV). A better translation that better captures the dynamism of the Hebrew is that of Mitchell Dahood, “When God arises, his foes scatter, and his enemies flee before him. Like drifting smoke they are driven, like melting wax before the fire; at the sight of God the wicked disappear” (vss. 1-2).¹

With despisers of God scattered (whether individuals or nations), the triumphal procession of Yahweh worshippers begins (“The just will rejoice, they will exult at the sight of God, they will

¹ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II, The Anchor Bible* (NY: Doubleday, 1968), p. 130.

jubilate with joyful song”, Dahood, vs. 3). They begin their march toward the temple, praising God and singing. And of what do they sing?

They first testify to God’s defeat of the Egyptians and his deliverance of Israel from bondage (vss. 2-7), their escape into the wilderness where they met with God at Mount Sinai and began there the formation of their nation (vss. 2-9), and finally their arrival and settlement in their Promised Land, the land of Canaan (vss. 10-15). The psalm then returns to the people’s origins, but does so by playing variations on that theme (vss. 16-19 a reprise of the Sinai theme, vss. 20-24 of God’s defeat of Egypt at the Red Sea, and finally in vss. 25-28 a third recall of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt). This recital culminates, in verses 29-31, in a prayer for help against a new threat from Egypt, built upon the insight that if God has been faithful in delivering Israel in the past, he will be faithful in delivering her from this new danger. The closing verses of the Psalm (vss. 32-36, which is part of the lectionary lesson) is then a call to prayer and praise as the people ascend to the Temple, trusting in the saving power of their God as demonstrated in the past and hopefully guaranteed for the future.

I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11 is Peter’s final reflection on suffering. There are two premises upon which Peter’s writings on suffering are based. The first premise is that being a Christian in a pagan world that is hostile to the political, social, economic and spiritual implications of the gospel makes suffering inevitable. The world, unwilling to embrace or even consider the ethics of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom, will resist violently any manifestation of that kingdom in their society. Therefore, Christians are experiencing suffering – and lots of it, and Peter is writing them in order to try to make some sense out of the apparent nonsense of their continuing rejection by Rome, Gentile and Jewish society. The second premise is that there is no merit in suffering brought about by misconduct; in such a case, you are receiving no more punishment than what you deserve. But I Peter 4:14-16 suggests that Christian suffering is quite another thing, for the very presence of such undeserved suffering is a sign of one’s very chosenness by God and the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s actions, such a presence that it brings inevitable retaliation (cf. Isa. 11:1-2).

In the light of these two premises, Peter makes three important points about such suffering. First, suffering unjustly for our embrace and living out of a shalom lifestyle, though undeserved, is used by God to purify us (cf. 1:7). Such purification doesn’t justify the suffering. Such persecution of people because they offer a more just alternative lifestyle to the world is wrong, no matter its outcome. And any system persecuting people this way needs to be held accountable. But an auxiliary benefit of such suffering, Peter suggests, is that it purifies the Christian, tending to make her more focused and committed to that revolutionary lifestyle that eventuated in such suffering. That “fiery ordeal” is “testing you (Christians)”, so that you are being refined much as gold is refined through the smelting process. In this way, the systems’ efforts to eliminate a Christian “system” that seeks shalom through acting justly, equitably and in commitment to one another and to God actually increases the commitment of those being persecuted. So, by persecuting the Church, the systems actually contribute to their own eventual defeat!

Second, for Christians to suffer is “sharing (in) Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory which is the Spirit of God is resting on you” (vss. 13-14). For Christians to receive the hostility and rejection of the world’s political, economic and religious systems and their leaders is to experience nothing more than what Jesus experienced. He was hounded, criticized and confronted by those systems throughout his entire ministry, and ultimately, he was rejected, persecuted, beaten and crucified by those self-same systems because they reacted so violently to the gospel (that is, the shalom lifestyle) that he proclaimed and was bringing into reality. Likewise, we are persecuted by those same systems. We are in no more privileged a position than is our Lord. Therefore, for us to receive the same kind of treatment he received is, in reality, an unintentional compliment on the part of the systems because that is an indication that they identify us with Christ and all that Christ stood for (e.g., Rom. 8:17; II Cor. 1:5; Phil. 1:29; Col. 1:24).

Third, recognizing that these are the grounds of our suffering at the hands of the Roman, Gentile and Jewish systems, our task is to trust God to do the work that needs to be done to bring about transformation in the world (5:6-11). That Godly work is found in the impact of our response to such persecution as it collides with the perpetrators of that persecution, with the nonbelievers who see both how we are treated and how we choose to respond, and with our brother and sister Christians. That Godly work is accomplished through our responses of acceptance (rather than acquiescence), a trusting in God, remaining disciplined and vigilant. But most of all it is accomplished by creating a “company of the suffering”, sharing in the suffering of the entire Christian community throughout the Greco-Roman world, a company that is united not around a common theology, liturgy or polity but around a common commitment to “Christ and his kingdom”, a commitment to justice, equity and unity that reveals itself in its violent rejection by a world that wants instead only to oppress, exploit and dominate!

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