

13th June 2021  
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Sunday after the Ascension

1] You may recall that at the Service of Twelve Gospels in Holy Week, the first and very long reading is taken from the long discourse in chapters thirteen to seventeen of John's gospel. It is often called the High Priestly Prayer of Christ. We have just heard in the gospel today, a portion of those precious and sacred words of Our Lord.

2] Christ is here, praying aloud before his disciples at the Mystical Supper. At one and the same time he is both communing with His Father and also speaking in Theology, that is, revealing the Word of God to his listeners. For St John the Evangelists, those who listen are not just the apostles gathered in the upper room but also, we who hear these words proclaimed today. As Our Lord says later on in this chapter: 'I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word.' [Jn.17:20]

3] Truly, God is not bound by Time; even though our logical and sequential minds are thrown into confusion at the idea, Christ speaks here as if His purpose and mission were already accomplished; as if He were already being glorified before heaven and earth, even though the crucifixion and the resurrection are yet to happen.

4] Clearly, these chapters repay serious meditation and study, for they record the essence of the gospel according to John, making sense of all else in his narrative that comes before and after. It is as if Time were suspended and we have been afforded the opportunity to draw back the veil, peering into the very mystery of why the Word was made flesh.

5] The spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church has rightly promoted the need for all to practise continuous repentance, to be vigilant and watchful over the soul, and to pursue true humility before God and before others. Many of the words of our prayers, whether liturgical and personal, lead the mind to consider our

unworthiness as we stand before our Creator. Equally strange, that when a man is ordained to the sacred ministry, the congregation call out, *Axios! Axios!* when none of us is worthy. As Christ says in St Luke's gospel: 'When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' [Lk.17:10]

6] But this cannot be all; we must balance our penitence and lowliness with hope and joy. It has always struck me a somewhat strange that we are very good, very detailed, in our asceticism when it comes to observing the Great Lenten Fast, but this becomes more uncertain when it is a matter of celebrating the joy of Pascha. To reduce both seasons merely to not eating certain foods, then eating certain foods, appears to miss the point.

7] Yet here in the words of John's gospel today we learn what awaits us; what is the end and goal of all our struggle; our purpose, aim and reward in Christ. It is nothing less than our own glorification!

8] Of all the books in the Old Testament canon, The Song of Songs, attributed to Solomon, will strike some minds as a peculiar choice. Love poetry and erotic verse might seem out of place among sacred writings to the more puritanical, but the Church has always interpreted this book, spiritually, as with all scripture. The love is that between God and His people, Christ and the Church, his bride. This is, after all, how St Paul, writing to the Ephesians, can perceive marriage to be an icon of that spiritual union: 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.' [Eph.5:31-32]

9] And St Gregory of Nyssa writing, as he did, homilies on the Song of Songs, himself refers to words from later on in chapter seventeen of John's gospel. St Gregory first quotes the words from verse twenty-two: 'And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.' And he goes on to explain, 'The person... who has reached maturity of mind, who, in

a word, has become capable of receiving the glory of the Spirit through his purity and his mastery over his passions - he it is who is the perfect dove on whom the bridegroom gazes when he says, [and here, St Gregory quotes from the Song of Songs] “My dove, my perfect one, is only one.”

10] Here then, in this middle period, this in-between-time, following the Ascension and awaiting Pentecost Sunday, we are like people who have gone to see a play in the theatre: one half of the drama is behind us, and taking some refreshment in the interval, we await the climax of the piece. And yet each of us, the great body of the Orthodox believers, knows the conclusion already; to have been baptised into the mystery of the Trinity, and to have received the Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, we already participate in the life to come; that glory that Christ has promised us, is ours even now, if we could but grasp hold of that life, before the time.

11] One idea, one approach, one thought from the mind of Christ, will guard us, warn us, admonish us as we tread carefully through this current life, this in-between-time. That is, the remembrance not just of our mortality, not just our lowliness, but also, perhaps more powerfully, our glory and our dignity in Christ; the very idea that sin of any kind is not worthy of us and that any fall is not just sin against God, but is also beneath what we have become in Christ.

12] The words of the gospel today invite us back once more: ‘Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name, which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are one.’ Do you see how important, how crucial it is that we are here and that we are in unity? Living in the body, living in this world, it is for each of us to do, as it says in our ancient Rite of Baptism, to keep our baptismal garment undefiled. The same rite refers to Chrismation as the earnest of the Spirit, that is, the pledge of what is yet to be fully revealed in us: the glory of God. We are to become partakers in the divine nature by sharing in the energies of God Himself, and one of them is Glory. We are to become glorious in eternal life. If such is the case, if such is our belief, how can we regard, or value; how can we participate

in or pursue, or become enslaved to, worldly enticements, distractions and passions?

13] We already have all the means at our disposal. The spiritual means that can bring anyone to maturity in Christ are there in the inexhaustible treasury that is the Church's holy mysteries. We have the liturgy, the Orthodox dogmas, the Holy scriptures, the sacred ministry, the writings of the fathers, the holy icons, the prayers of the saints: what more could we want? As Paul tells the Ephesians, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.' [Eph.1:3]

14] To the presbyters of the same church at Ephesus we see St Paul today delivering a charge: that they had a duty to watch over their flock, to guard them from what he calls the wolves. As your pastor I have that same duty, and, therefore, I shall repeat again, I shall reiterate, words I have cited many times before, for repetition has always been necessary for solid learning: 'O Christian, be aware of your dignity.' So said St Leo the Great in a Christmas homily. It is the constant remembrance of that dignity, just as much as continual repentance, that will keep us all from corruption in this world. And being at unity in our common faith, God the Father will keep us in His Name, and we shall be one, as Christ and the Father are one, and we shall have Christ's own joy fulfilled in ourselves.