

"God's Word is Truth"

May 12, 2024

John 17:11b-19

"Holy Father, keep them in your name...sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth".

Dear Christian friends,

What joy we find in today's Gospel lesson! Our Lord Jesus Christ is praying to His Father in heaven. He is praying for Himself. He is praying for His disciples. He is praying for the Church. He is praying for you.

I. The Son of God in the World

It will be later that evening that Jesus is betrayed, and now He prays. He is there to accomplish His Father's will: God the Father has sent His Son into the world -- not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him (Jn. 3:17). God has sent His Son to be the saving Word; and to accomplish this task, the Son has become flesh. This is essential: Flesh and blood are necessary if Jesus is to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Word made flesh has come into the world to serve and to save.

Jesus is in the world, but He is not of the world. This is obvious, for there is so much that is marvelously unnatural about Him. He is born of the virgin. He is perfectly obedient - without any sin of thought, word or deed. He lives in service to others. He performs miracles, healing the sick and casting out demons. He warns people of the danger of sin and declares to them the free gift of salvation. He is a man set apart, for He is both God and Man. Jesus sums up His ministry halfway through Matthew by saying, "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them" (Matt. 11:5).

That makes sense, joyful sense. But in the very next verse, He says, "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Offended? Who would be offended by the One who heals and saves for eternity? Just about everybody, it seems. When Jesus announces that He is the only Way to heaven, He is also saying that no other god can save. This angers some. When He says that only His work saves, He also declares that people cannot save themselves by their own works. This enrages more. One would think that healing and salvation would be met with thankfulness, but there's more at play here. The **evil one** is at work, continually whispering that this Savior must be destroyed. The **world** is saturated with sin, and thus predisposed to reject healing and life. Therefore, these foes conspire together; and shortly after Jesus finishes His prayer in our Gospel lesson, He is arrested, beaten and crucified. The injustice is clear: Jesus is put to death solely because He is innocent, because He speaks the truth, and because He is the Son of God. He speaks the truth to save the world, and the world is violently offended.

Yet the murder of God's Son does not seal the world's destruction; the Lord uses this for the good of His enemies. As Jesus prays in our Gospel lesson, He sanctifies Himself. In other words, He sets Himself apart to be the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. He suffers that death to redeem all nations. He suffers that death to redeem you.

That's the Savior in the world. The Word becomes flesh and comes into the world to serve and to save -- by His life and His death, so that you might be saved from this world.

And what is He doing in our Gospel lesson, just before His terrible suffering and death? He is not looking out for Himself. He is praying for His disciples.

2. The Disciples in the World

Jesus prays for His disciples because, after His resurrection, He will send them into the world, to all nations. The Father sent the Son into the world to win salvation. The Son will send the disciples into the world to preach His Word of salvation.

In Jesus' prayer, He prays about the gifts that He and His Father give to the disciples for the mission that they face. The Lord gives them His name; He reveals who He is so that they might call upon Him. Also, by placing His name upon them, He declares that they are under His protection and in His keeping. When the Apostles speak, they speak as His ambassadors -- on His authority, not their own. They speak His Word, not their own.

The Lord gives them His Word -- not just to **tell** to others. He gives them His Word of truth so that they might be **sanctified** -- set apart from the judgment of the world. By His Word, the Lord shows them their sin and moves them to repentance; by His Word, the Lord graces them with His forgiveness. These are some of the blessings which the Lord bestows upon His when He sends them into the world as His apostles.

The apostles will go forth into the world. They will proclaim the Good News of freedom from guilt, healing from affliction, eternal life after death. They will preach Christ and Him crucified for the sins of the world. They will go forth, preaching the sanctifying Word, the free gift of forgiveness, so that all who hear and believe will be saved.

They will go into the world, but they are not of the world. In fact, as Jesus says in His prayer, the world will hate them. In declaring the free gift of salvation in Jesus, the apostles will also be saying that there is salvation in no other god. In declaring the works of the Savior, they will announce that no one can save himself by his own doing. The world will hate them, and engineer their deaths. It is tempting to look wistfully back at the first days of the Church with rose-colored glasses. Peter preaches a sermon on Pentecost and 3000 are baptized; we give thanks for this, but we dare not forget that Peter will be imprisoned, beaten and eventually crucified upside down. Paul goes on journeys and plants churches everywhere--once again, thanks be to God! But he is also arrested, imprisoned, beaten, stoned and beheaded. Of the apostles, only John lives to a ripe old age and doesn't suffer a violent death; of course, this also means that he sees far more brutality against Christians than the others. You see, there never has been a time when the Church and the world coexisted peacefully. The world and the evil one will always conspire and try to stamp out the message of forgiveness, life and salvation.

Jesus prays for the apostles because the world will hate them. But this does not mean the apostles are wrong. We do not denounce them for the reception they receive and the offense that many feel; we rejoice in the Word that they proclaim. Sanctified by the Word of truth, they want others to be set apart for eternal life. The message is so precious and saving that they are willing to die so that others can hear it.

3. The Church in the World Today

Today, the Church is entrusted with continuing the apostolic ministry: We still go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all that the Lord has commanded. This is the sole mission of the Church in the world.

As He did for the disciples, the Lord Jesus Christ gives us gifts as well.

He gives us His name. He places it on each of us in Baptism, and so we are under His care and protection. He reveals it to us so that we can call upon Him, trusting that He will give us whatever we ask in His name. We begin our service "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," because our Lord promises that He is present when even only two or three gather in His name. We preach in the name of Jesus: We speak His Words, not ours. We thus speak by His authority, not our own.

The Lord gives us His Word, and with this gift He gives us the Sacraments, too. By His Word of truth, He warns of our sin, calls us to repentance, and showers forgiveness upon us. By this forgiveness, He sanctifies **us** -- He sets **us** apart. He declares, "You no longer face the judgment of God for sin; because though you were once sinful, I have died on the cross to take your sin away."

Though He has set us apart from the world, He keeps us in the world to do His bidding: Namely, we proclaim that Good News to others. We don't hoard the message of salvation to ourselves; in Christian love, we want others to hear it, too. Therefore, we declare the Good News that, though the world was lost in sin, the Lord Jesus Christ has suffered and died to redeem the world. We declare that He is risen again to forgive and save. We joyfully proclaim that, apart from Christ, there was no hope of salvation--not in other gods or human works; but Christ has died and Christ is risen so that all who believe in Him may be saved. And we make known that the forgiveness Christ has won is absolutely free, because Jesus' death was sufficient to pay for it all.

It is a great, and humbling, privilege to proclaim this truth of God. Therefore, we give thanks that the Lord has placed us in the world to do so.

Remember, however: We are in the world, but we are not of the world. And if the world hated Jesus and the apostles, you can expect the world to hate anyone who continues to proclaim the same message today.

The world and the evil one conspire together, because they do not like the message of the Gospel. When we declare that Jesus is the Way to heaven, part of that message is to declare that there is no other salvation but in Him. In the midst of a fire, one is lauded as a hero if he points people to the only safe exit. But as you and I declare the one Door from this world to heaven, the world will object the message.

Therefore, expect opposition. Expect that, when the Gospel is proclaimed, people will be offended.

You should expect this because Scripture says it is so. Jesus notes in the Gospel lesson for today that the world will hate the disciples because they are His. St. Paul writes in I Corinthians, "For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:22-24). The Gospel is foolishness and an offense to

those who do not believe. In Galatians 5, he writes that he is persecuted because of the offense of the Gospel (Gal. 5:11); if he stopped preaching the Gospel, the offense would cease. The Scriptures declare that people will be offended when the Gospel is proclaimed; this is the Word of the Lord. If we deny this truth, we are set up to fall into some dangerous temptations.

In our present time, it is assumed that one of the greatest wrongs one can commit is to be offensive to others. Therefore, when we offend anyone, we are conditioned to assume that the problem is with us because we should never be offensive. The evil one likes to apply this to religion, whispering that any teaching which offends must be wrong; therefore, if we are to reach out to others, we must remove anything that is offensive from our teaching and our worship. But-according to Scripture-if we are to remove all offense from our teaching and worship, we must cease to preach the Gospel. And if we cease to preach the Gospel, we have nothing that saves to reach out with.

Offense accompanies the Gospel in this world. The one who preaches the Gospel will offend and be criticized for it. The opposite is true as well: The preacher who fails to preach the Gospel will not be offensive to the world.

Of course, we must warn of one other sin as well: Not everyone who offends is necessarily preaching the Gospel. Some Christians measure their faith by how much they offend others; in many cases, it is their behavior and boorishness that offends -- not the sweet teaching of the pure Gospel. We do not measure the message by how much it offends; we measure the message by how well it proclaims what Scripture says. We remain faithful to that message, and we speak that Truth in love, knowing that some will be offended by it.

Thus the Church finds itself in a most curious position. It is given to us to proclaim the Good News that salvation is free for the sake of Jesus -- that He has redeemed the world from sin. There is no other Gospel that saves; and yet, we also know that the world hates the message that Christ has saved it.

The Gospel offends. So why proclaim it? Here is why: The Lord has given you **His Name**. He has placed His name upon you and said, "You belong to Me. I have died for you and risen again; I have washed you clean in Holy Baptism. Once you were an offense to Me; but while you were yet a sinner, I died for you (Ro. 5:8). Once, in your sin, you were offended by the Gospel; but I have given you faith and opened your eyes so that you see and rejoice in the truth." The Lord has given you His name.

The Lord has given you **His Word**. By His Word and work, you recognize your own sinfulness and need for His grace. By His Word, you understand that the world is blind in sin; and it is because of this blindness that the Gospel is offensive. And in that Word, the Lord declares to you, "Once you were blind in sin and opposed to the light. But I called you by the Gospel and enlightened you with My gifts. I am the Light of the world; and by the Word I give My Church to proclaim, I still bring light to the darkness." The Lord has given you His Word.

The Lord has set you apart - He has sanctified you by His Word of truth. By the truth that He speaks, He has saved you from the Judgment that will fall upon the world for sin. Setting you apart from the world, He leaves you in the world so that His Word might continue to be proclaimed. The Lord has set you apart -- for life and salvation. What a joyous honor we have to spread that message as we can.

You and I have much to rejoice in today. The Lord prays for you. He gives you His name and He gives you His Word. He has set you apart for holiness, as He proclaims to you this saving Word: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.