

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

This is a busy Sunday for our parish. Last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension which is the celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven after his resurrection. The ascension was witnessed by his disciples in the little village of Bethany just outside of Jerusalem. It's Jesus' final leave-taking from this world and his return to God his Father. It is the end of his physical earthly presence and as such is an important Feast Day in the Christian calendar.

But we have even more to celebrate on this particular Sunday. In a few moments we will be welcoming Jace Anane into the body of Christ in Holy Baptism. It's an important milestone in his life and in the lives of his parents and family. He will become one of Christ's own forever and his parents will watch over him and teach him and guide him until he is old enough to take on for himself the vows they make today on his behalf.

Today is also Mother's Day, a day which the secular world sets apart for all of us to honor the one who brought us into this world. It's a hard day for some...for those who wish to be mothers, but aren't yet; for those who have chosen not to be mothers and may sometimes wonder if they've made the right choice; for those who have lost a child; and for those whose memories of their mother are quite strong and vivid even though their mothers are no longer physically present with them in this world. It's a busy Sunday for us this year.

The words we hear from Jesus this morning in the Gospel of John are particularly poignant given the multiple meanings of this particular Sunday. This passage from John is part of the witness of Jesus' final night with his disciples before his crucifixion. It appears in none of the other gospels, all of which focus on Maundy Thursday, the institution of the Holy Eucharist, the service of foot-washing that Jesus gave to his disciples and the night he spent praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. The Gospel of John records this intercessory prayer by Jesus to God his Father after the Maundy Thursday time he spent at dinner with his disciples and before the time they accompanied him to Gethsemane.

We have an opportunity to eavesdrop on Jesus as he prays to God about his disciples and about his own leave-taking from them. In his own way, Jesus is making preparation to launch them into the world without his physical presence in much the same way that earthly parents launch their own children out into the world without them. It's a precious time. It's a dramatic transition. It's often a very anxious time both for those who are leaving and those who are left behind. Jesus, led by God, has chosen these people to be his disciples and to ultimately go out into the world on their own representing Jesus, bearing witness to Jesus, and proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world. It's a task not without dangers.

As Jesus prays, he reminds God that he has made God's name known to all the ones that God has given him. And he tells God that the words God gave to him, he shared with them and they heard them all and believed them. They are now convinced that Jesus was sent from God. Because they are convinced, they are in peril in the world which is a hostile place. Their own religious community, the Jewish synagogue, has expelled them and left them with no faith community except the one that Jesus has established for them. They are outcasts in the world by both the faith community that they've always known and by the Roman government that subjugates them. There is no refuge for them except in Jesus and in God.

In this conversation with God, Jesus reminds God that Jesus is leaving the world and is coming to God, but these disciples...now apostles sent out into the world to spread the message of the unity between God and Jesus...are in mortal danger from the world. Jesus begs his Holy Father to protect them and to make them one with God just as Jesus himself is one with God. It's a profound request. Jesus reminds God that while he was with them, he protected them and guarded them. Not one was lost, he says, except the one that was destined to be lost and we know that he was referring to Judas. Not losing any of the disciples fulfilled the ancient scriptures in the Jewish Torah.

Jesus tells God that he has given these precious disciples God's word. He has made God known to them and that the world has hated them just as the world hated Jesus himself. He knows that they no longer belong to the world just as Jesus did not belong to the world. Jesus clarifies for God that he is not asking that the disciples be taken out of the world, but that God protect them from the evil one who is operating in the world. When Jesus asks for them to be sanctified by God, he is asking that God set them apart. These are believers who will need to continue to operate in the world, but not as others do. They are to move and work and be in the world as an alternative to the way most of the world works and operates. They are to remain in the world and yet be different. For them, it cannot be 'business as usual.'

And neither can it be 'business as usual' for us. We have taken baptismal vows or our parents have taken them for us when we were infants and we took them on for ourselves when we were confirmed. The world's rules and values are not ours...or shouldn't be. Jesus' commandments to us require that we engage with the world, but engage differently...not on our own behalf, but on behalf of Christ Jesus...remembering in all our interactions with others all the lessons he taught us. He sent his disciples...and us...out into the world to make God known to others, not just in terms of theological statements, but in terms of how we engage with them. Our behavior speaks volumes. We, too, have been set apart by virtue of our belief in Jesus and through our baptism. We are in the world, but like the disciples, we are not of the world. The concerns and priorities of the secular world may not necessarily be our concerns.

This prayer that Jesus makes to his Holy Father is all about the preparation Jesus is making for launching his disciples into the world without him, not unlike the way we launch our own children into the world without us. We ask for God's protection for them. We ask that God set them apart to be witnesses to God's love...to provide that experience to others not just in the words they say, but in the actions they take.

From time to time, we hear debates about whether or not the church should be involved in politics...whether or not politics should be preached from the pulpit. The Gospel itself is all about politics. It's all about God's expectations of us and Jesus' charge to us that we go out into the world and make our witness to Christ known through words as well as actions. Jesus charged us to love one another, to protest about injustice, to seek out the marginalized around us, to give comfort to the sick and to the lonely. Anything that has to do with human interaction is about politics. Those in positions of power make decisions on our behalf that affect the welfare of all. If we are going to participate in the world as Jesus has charged us to do, we cannot remain silent and we cannot remain inactive. If we are part of a system that harms our fellow human beings, Jesus' mandate to us is clear. We must work to correct that injustice. Being silent and inactive is not an option for a practicing Christian. It is not easy and it is not comfortable and it is not without controversy. The original disciples faced all the same problems that we face. And they were challenged to figure out how to stand for Christ in a world that did not revere him...in fact, hated him. Our own world is not that much different. In fact, in some respects it is far more complex and difficult. The choices and dilemmas we face are often confusing and muddled.

But just as Jesus launched his disciples into the world...and just as parents launch their children into the world, preparations for that launch are made. Parents share their wisdom and warnings with their children before they launch them into adult life. Jesus also shared his wisdom and his warnings with his disciples...and with us. And we pray for those in our care that must go out into the world without us, just as Jesus prayed for his disciples as he sent them out into the world without him. God's protection does not mean that God will keep anything bad from happening. We know that evil lurks...sometimes where we least expect it. But God's protection keeps us intact. It keeps our souls within His care no matter what happens to us in this life.

So as Jesus launched his disciples...as we were launched by our own mothers and fathers...and as we launch the children entrusted to us, remember that in all things Jesus bridges the gap between our humanity and the divinity of God. Jesus understands how we feel about launching those in our care and about how we feel about being launched ourselves. Jesus has been on both sides of that experience.

And while we may long to retreat from the world, to not get involved, to not let the world touch us, we need also to remember that the retreat is for respite, not for living our lives. We've been given a mandate to engage with the world no matter how formidable a task that might seem to us. As disciples and believers in Jesus Christ, we've been launched...we've been given our marching orders. We know what we've been asked to do in the world...to represent him, to speak his truth, and to take action on his behalf.

And with God's help, and the love of Jesus Christ, and the strength and power of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit we will be able to follow Jesus into any situation and represent him well.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.