

John:17:1-11 The High Priestly Prayer (28.05.2017)

Prayer

In all the many pieces of theatre that Avril and I have seen, there have been some most memorable, precious moments - well certainly memorable at the time it's just recalling them, that is the problem. I keep a theatre diary and that helps. I'd like to share one such moment with you now. In August 2008 we went to the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford to see a Royal Shakespeare performance of "Hamlet." That evening there was a queue for returns 20 or more deep probably because David Tennant was playing Hamlet, with Patrick Stewart Claudius. Doctor Who meets Captain Picard from Star Wars you might say. You will remember that Hamlet, the indecisive hero, is seeking an opportunity to take revenge on Claudius for murdering his father, then marrying his mother and so usurping the throne of Denmark. An excellent opportunity presents itself when Hamlet finds Claudius in his chamber on his knees, praying. Hamlet draws his dagger, raises it up to strike Claudius with the words:

"Now might I do it pat. Now he is a-praying."

At that very moment there was a total blackout. The Interval. Gregory Doran, the director, had made a decision to have the interval in the middle of a famous speech of great tension. That's what I call bold directing...and a moment I won't forget.

The second half opened with Hamlet's dagger still drawn above Claudius:

"And now I'll do it. And so he goes to heaven."

Hamlet has second thoughts - one of his problems - Claudius may have been in the middle repenting and so will be saved and go to heaven. The play continues.

Prayer is a sacred mystery which no-one can penetrate except the one who is praying. Hamlet was unable to tell what Claudius was praying and so he pauses and waits. In our reading from John's gospel this morning, another king is praying, Jesus is praying. We know Jesus prayed. The gospels tell us constantly. But they hardly tell us what he prayed or how he prayed. These outstanding ecstatic verses, known as the High Priestly Prayer, are a unique look into our Lord Jesus' prayer life. As with Claudius his prayer is personal, yet not simply by himself with God, but heard by his disciples. Jesus is not on his knees, but rather looking up to heaven. This is part of John's long discourse on the events the day before his crucifixion. There is no Gethsemane prayer in John's gospel. Where the prayer took place we cannot be certain. The Upper Room? Walking towards the garden? The Kidron valley? Yet it was intimate, heard only by the Father and those disciples who had served him so well, those disciples whom Jesus loved.

Those disciples, with just Judas the betrayer missing, were named in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. They have just witnessed another intimate, personal event, the Ascension of our Lord. There is no great fanfare, just Jesus' last instructions before a

gentle, quiet departure. As we listen again during Easter to all those resurrection appearances up to the time of his Ascension, we are struck by their intimacy; they are all personal encounters to a few at a time, in private spaces: Mary Magdalene at the tomb, the eleven in the upper room, two friends on the road to Emmaus, breakfast with seven fishermen on the beach. He doesn't appear to the great and the good, say to Pilate or Herod or the High Priest, interesting as all those might have been. These intimate happenings contrast greatly with the crucifixion which is a great public affair where even the passers-by can rail against him. But the crucifixion was Jesus' glory and this prayer of Jesus' is a prayer on glory and on his glorification. I'll come to this shortly.

So what can we learn about prayer and our faith from Jesus' High Priestly prayer in John's gospel this morning? The first part of the prayer is both a celebration and a request. Jesus is celebrating that he has finished the work that his Father gave him to do and that he has laid before his chosen disciples all that his Father has given to him. And so now his hour has come. His request is to be glorified: "So now Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." In prayer we can celebrate and give thanks not only for all the blessings God has given us, but for all the work that we have achieved as a church through our God-given talents and skills. That's not always easy. We can make requests. And be rigorous with those requests as Abraham was rigorous in his plea to God for the righteous in Sodom. I always remember John Henton, one of our previous priests, saying, "Be prepared to intrude and transform people in prayer."

The second part of the prayer is about relationships, those Jesus has with his disciples and those he has with all who does his work. Even on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus is not so much concerned with himself, but with those he loved. As he gives way to God's glory, he hands over his disciples to God's protection: "Holy Father", he prays, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Even though his disciples are about to betray him, deny him and abandon him, he wants them to find comfort and peace, knowing that each of their worlds is about to be torn apart. And so we pray for those we love, despite what heartache that might bring. And we pray for those whose world has been torn apart, thinking especially of all those caught up in the terrorist attack in the Manchester arena. Faith and prayer is about our relationship with God. Jesus formed intimate relationships with his disciples, so we are invited to enter into a relationship with him.

Primarily this prayer reveals the glory of Christ, the way God is made known to human beings. People were created by God to have a relationship with God. Eternal life means knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ, his son, whom God sent. His glorification was revealed on earth through his divine power, his miraculous deeds and words; is revealed with the Father in heavenly glory; is revealed in the divine love of his crucifixion. Glory is no magic wand, no get out of jail free card, no miraculous escape from what lay ahead.

Glory was Gethsemane, torture, crucifixion, utter despondency and dereliction. Glory is resurrection. We are his disciples and called to share his glory. How? By speaking God's name to others through the way we bless them with food, clothing, love and hope. This takes courage. In this morning's gospel Jesus prays for us, because we are his disciples.

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