

Reflections on the High Priestly Prayer

When I was driving home along a deserted rural road, I passed by a solitary person walking her dog along the road wearing a face mask. Regardless of what you think of her decision to wear a face mask, it represents the fear found in this current moment in time. Of course, there have been other times of great fear in American society, and despair as well. The “greatest generation,” which included my parents, lived through the great depression and then WWII. During these times of crisis, people sometimes turn to their faith for comfort. The most famous Christian apology of the twentieth century, *Mere Christianity*, began as a series of BBC radio broadcasts during WWII. Such reassurance is expressed by the song [Give to the Winds Your Fears](#), found on YouTube.

The very human people we meet in the Bible knew fear as well. And, I would hasten to add, fear of disease as well. Think about all of those lepers who were forced to socially distance themselves.

We frequently read that the disciples of Jesus faced fears, including the loss of their leader. Not just his death, but his later ascension into heaven as well. Jesus had left the building - now what about us? There is a surprising amount of material in the New Testament devoted to this theme. It has the flavor that Jesus, the master, has left. But it also assures us that we should take heart because he will return. The New Testament also offers instruction as to what the followers of Jesus should be doing while they await his return.

The lectionary site that I frequently use, sponsored by the [Vanderbilt Library](#), offers artwork to accompany each week’s lectionary readings. This week’s art work is focused on ascension themes. The description of Jesus’ ascension is only found in the *Acts of the Apostles*. It is a sparse two verses:

1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

The followers of Jesus must have been confused by what they had just witnessed. I would have been! We read about their confusion in verse 1:11:

They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

This rhetorical question indicates that the followers of Jesus were confused by what they had witnessed.



The Ascension, John Singleton Copley, 1738-1815.

Acts is sparse in its description of the ascension. Perhaps for this reason, the lectionary offers John 17 as guide to its meaning. But John 17 is more than an explanation of the ascension. It offers insight into Jesus' ministry and the lives of his followers.

In John 17, Jesus offers a prayer, which is both a prayer and a teaching. A teaching and prayer for his followers and for us as well. It teaches that the apex of God's self-revelation in Jesus is the crucifixion and resurrection. It also anticipates that they will be left bereft of an in-person leader. The prayer is to help them and us carry on after the ascension.

One particular verse stayed with me after I read through John 17, 17:6. It reads:

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."

In this verse, Jesus is addressing his Father in prayer. When Jesus says, "I have made your name known," he means more than what we think of as name. Jesus means he made God the Father known in the world. He did this through his teachings, which are recorded for us, and with what is coming for him and his followers- the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The very character of God is revealed by the teaching and actions of Jesus. Is there anything more missing in today's world than a sense of God's character - that he is trustworthy?

Jesus also assures his followers of their place in the created order of things. They belonged to God the Father because he chose them, and now they belong to the God the Son because the Father gave them to the Son. The same holds true for us. Jesus assures his followers that they will always belong to him, in this life, and in the next. God has made it so and it is inconceivable that God will change his mind.

Notes:

This week's lectionary lessons can be found at the [Vanderbilt Divinity School library](#). They are:

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11