

Greetings to you all! We are now in the 6th Sunday after Easter. We celebrated Ascension Day on Thursday the 14th, forty days after the resurrection of Jesus. During this time the risen Lord appeared to the disciples and to many others revealing himself as part of the post resurrection appearances. On the 40th day he ascended into heaven and was exalted to the right hand of God. The theme for this morning is, 'The Ascended Lord upholds those who are united to him in faith.'

Jesus was going back to the Father but he was not going to leave his followers alone. He was going back so that the promised Holy Spirit could come and reside among all the believers. The power and the presence of the Holy Spirit would make all the disciples bold and enable them to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and in the uttermost part of the earth. We will be celebrating the feast of Pentecost next Sunday when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all the believers. The gospel passage from St. John is part of Jesus' High Priestly prayer. This prayer is primarily for the protection and unity of the followers of Christ.

Christ is fully aware that after the resurrection he would leave the world and go back to the Father. The process of departure had already begun. The disciples were to continue the work of Christ in the world but they would be bereft of Christ's physical presence. The 'world' for John represents unbelief and rejection of Jesus and his followers. Jesus' prayer is for protection because the world will hate and persecute the followers of Jesus just as much as they persecuted Jesus. But it is in the midst of such persecution that the Lord upholds us. When Stephen was being stoned for testifying to Christ he sees the heavens open and the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God. He then addresses Jesus to receive his spirit and not to hold this sin against them. Jesus' ascension into heaven shows that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God, a position of authority where he is able to help each one of us who are united to him in faith.

Jesus continues in his prayer saying, 'while I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost so that scripture might be fulfilled.' The Ascended Christ is like the good shepherd who took care of his sheep. Jesus took care of his followers while on earth and now continues to do so.

Jesus continues to pray saying that he had given his followers the 'word' and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world just as he did not belong to the world. The world constantly shows unbelief and rejection and therefore hates the disciples. However, for the believers God has given them and us the word. Jesus then prays that his followers should not be taken out of the world but that they be protected from the evil one. Though Satan has been defeated on the cross he still has not been deprived of the power to tempt Christians to do evil. That is why the Lord taught us to pray 'deliver us from the evil one.' We need the protection of Jesus against the evil one who is always prowling like a lion to devour us.

Finally, we see Jesus praying that they may be sanctified in the truth. The word of God, both the written word and the revealed word helped the disciples to stand firm in the truth of Jesus Christ, that he came to save the world and that he gave his life for us. The word leads us into this understanding of truth. The word also protects and sanctifies us. When Jesus prays for the sanctification of the believers in the truth, the request is to set apart or consecrate them for the purpose of carrying out God's appointed task.

Just as the Father had sent the Son, now the Son sends the disciples into the world. Their mission is the mission of Jesus, and Jesus's mission is the mission of God. The mission of God was to send his son Jesus Christ into the world to save it perishing from sin and darkness. The ascended Christ continues to uphold us as we are united to him in faith. May we truly stand firm to the end through the presence of the Holy Spirit that God's name will be glorified.

Shalom

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