

7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A, 2020

You may have noticed over the last couple of weeks or so that our Gospel readings have come from the section of John's Gospel known as the 'High Priestly Prayer' of Jesus. It is the section from chapters 13-17 where Jesus teaches his apostles at great length at the Last Supper. It is called as such because of the many priestly themes it touches on throughout; and here we come to its conclusion. The allusion we have here to the priestly prayers is that of the Feast of the Atonement (Yom Kippur), where the High Priest, once a year, would solemnly proclaim the one true name of God in the Holy of Holies (YHWH). This is what Jesus is referring to when he says, 'I have made your name known'. Only the High Priest would make God's name known. But it was also the function of the High Priest to offer the sacrifices in the Temple – where God's name is made known. Jesus too is preparing a sacrifice of flesh and blood. First of all, in the Last Supper where the bread and wine are proclaimed to be his own body and blood 'offered' for many. But, secondly, and wholly identified with it, in his passion and crucifixion which immediately follow these words of instruction.

And we can tell that this is precisely what he wants his disciples to understand, because this is finally his 'hour'. If you remember, it is way back in the same of Gospel of John at the wedding feast at Cana that Jesus says to Mary, 'why look to me? My hour has not yet come' (Jn 2:4). Well, now it has; and what this 'hour' is all about is his passion and crucifixion. For what it is worth, some scholars have called into question the historical reliability of John's account here. I think they are mistaken. I think the reason John remembers these words so well is precisely because he was the only disciple to accompany Mary to the cross itself. They made a big impression on him because he witnessed so first-hand their fulfilment.

What it leaves us with, though, is a peculiar juxtaposition. Because the central theme running through all these words of Jesus is that of 'glory': glorifying the Son and the Son glorifying the Father. Our minds naturally turn to the glory of the Resurrection and Ascension into heaven; and rightly so, especially at this time of year. But that is obviously not all that John (Jesus) wants us to see. It is that the 'glory' of Jesus is paradoxically found in his suffering and death.

Here we encounter an idea that is difficult for us to accept. Why would suffering and death have anything glorious about it? Shouldn't we do all we can to avoid suffering and death? Isn't that precisely the response we are living through right now with the lockdown of the entire world: the avoidance of suffering and death?

Well, yes, on the whole, we should of course avoid needless suffering and death. That is presumably what a God of love desires. But the suffering and death we are referring to here – the 'glory' – is not really about us; it's about who God is. It is about who God is revealing himself to be – 'I have made your name known'. Jesus is teaching us that the real essence of the God of love is to win men's hearts over to him in self-sacrificial love, not to bully them into submission through acts of worldly glory. He humbles himself to become one of us, to 'wash our feet', and he takes upon himself all our sufferings and deaths and unites them to his suffering and death to transform and redeem them from within; from within our human nature which he shares with us in the Incarnation and which now indeed is risen and glorified in the Ascension. Jesus is showing us that he, God, is so powerful that even the most contemptible of situations – poverty, disease, suffering and death – can be used by him to show the glory of his power.

However, herein lies a kind of spiritual law of intended consequences. It means that for those who live in Christ – especially the holiest of them, the saints – there is almost always a share in the sufferings of Christ. This is precisely why St Peter (who understood all this full well, of course!) exclaims in our

second reading: 'If you can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad, because then you will enjoy a much greater gladness when his glory is revealed'. All the apostles would go on to share in the sufferings of Christ, not least St Peter himself. But it is precisely in the transformative suffering of self-sacrificial love that the real 'glory' is found. This is why the Church has always glorified the Martyrs in her Sacred Liturgy: they manifest most supremely the true name of God.

For most of us, we will not be called to that level of supreme witness. But, remember, St Peter's example of suffering is the simple case of people insulting us for bearing the name of Christ. When people mock us for our beliefs as Catholic Christians or we find it difficult to stand by our faith in public, we should remember that it is precisely in those times – if we are faithful – that the 'Spirit of glory' is being revealed in us. And yes, with deep humility, we should be glad.

As we approach the Feast of Pentecost, let us pray that the Holy Spirit will come to us in our 'hours' of suffering, in whatever form that may take, and give us courage to unite them to the Lord's for his greater glory and, God-willing, our own at the end of days.