

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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WHAT'S NEXT? PRAY!

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Seventh Sunday of Easter

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ACTS 1:15-17, 21-26 | PSALM 1

1 JOHN 5:9-13 | JOHN 17:6-19

Let's say that a relationship has changed significantly, permanently, unsettling us. A person has walked out. A job has moved away. A world has ground to a halt. A loved one has died. The children have left home. You have left home. Someone betrayed you. You let down - betrayed - someone else.

What happens next. What's next, we ask? Perhaps it is time to pray!

The Church around the world celebrated the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday. The Ascension of the Risen Christ to the right hand of the Father marks the end of Easter proper - the end of Christ's presence with the disciples in his resurrected bodily form that lasted forty days - and the beginning of a time of waiting for what comes next.

Whenever we want to be ready for what comes next we need both imagination for possibilities and sober awareness of the past. The Ascension allows us to summarize in a picture all that brought us to the place, where, finally, we will see Jesus no more in the flesh. This includes, it turns out, the need to remember and heal the act of betrayal by a disciple that set in motion the attempt to destroy the very memory of Jesus.

Today, in our readings, we remember the mysterious role Judas plays in our salvation. The one who betrayed Jesus is not forgotten because without him, we would not be who we are, forgiven sinners, forgiven cowards, weaklings, and yes, betrayers. We remember that it is possible to be lost, that the faith we all share is fragile. We ask, in light of what has happened, how do we persevere, how do we welcome what is next.

The earliest Christian communities were being persecuted, thrown out of synagogues, fighting among themselves, but also full of devotion and self denying love. They had seen the Lord! They knew sustaining this faith required imagination and attention to the teachings Jesus had given them.

Thus, as Jesus ascended from their sight, they began to understand, that he now filled all things. They began to understand, that though they were vulnerable from every side, God now was in a position to act, to heal, to direct, to protect them from anywhere.

As they asked, 'what's next', they remembered that Jesus had prayed for them. They remembered the Lord's prayer. They prayed: 'Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.' They also remembered that Jesus had prayed for them, especially at that pivotal moment on the last night of his life.

All the gospels record that Jesus spent a powerful evening of prayer on that the eve of his crucifixion. John's gospel, however, records what has become known as the High Priestly Prayer. It is a prayer, not taught, but overheard. It reveals a blueprint for preparing oneself to welcome what is coming next in God's plan for your life.

The prayer in John chapter 17 is divided into three parts. First, Jesus prays for himself, that he will remember who he is as God remembers why he was sent into the world. The first movement of prayer is to see ourselves as God sees us, and to be grounded in that, moving from there.

Centering himself in God, Jesus then moves to the second part of the prayer, which is our gospel reading today. Next, Jesus prays for the disciples, that they too, would be protected from whatever is to come by being grounded in the words Jesus gave them. "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

This prayer is not focused on any one of Jesus' teachings. It recalls and unites them to every observation, direction or insight he gave them. They are the words that send them into the world, just as Jesus was sent into the world, drenched in love. "God so loved the world that he gave his Son."

Ultimately, in the third part of the prayer, Jesus will pray for us. For those who will believe because of their word and example. This is where it gets real. God's love pours out onto God's Son, the Son's love pours out onto his brothers and sisters, his friends who have shared life with him, and now is poured into us.

It seems we are far away from praying for our daily bread. For asking not to be led into temptation. From our laundry list of needs and projects. We are drawn, with the disciples, to hear Jesus praying for us. That we would plant ourselves in his love for us, in his knowledge that we have been made for good, and the knowledge we can gain from being a blessing to others.

The disciples had come to Jesus and asked: teach us to pray. He taught them the Lord's prayer. From this pray, on the last night of his life, that we are so privileged to overhear, we learn how to pray, by simply remembering who we are in him. We learn how to pray because prayer is the first act of love.

We pray because not to pray is an act of betrayal.

And what we learn most in these ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, between Jesus' disappearance from our sight in order to fill all things, and the coming of the first fruit of the Resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is that the agenda is to pray.

Please, as Jesus did, pray for yourself, for insight in to how God sees you. Pray for your family, for those who share your work, your passions and projects, pray they may see how God sees them and would use them to be a blessing to those around them.

And finally, pray for those who believe because of what you do today, what we do together today, to remind the world that God so loved it, that he gave his only Son, that faith in him, trust in him, would lead to inheriting everlasting life, yes, a world that will not pass away.