

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Easter VII – Sunday After Ascension  
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

A few days ago we celebrated the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our reading from The Acts of the Apostles recounts how this event took place on mount Olivet—that the Word which came down to dwell among men and women, children and adults, Samaritans, Jews, people of different languages and even Romans, Pharisees and Publicans, thieves and tax collectors, the sick and the healthy, Rabbis and fishermen now returns back to where He came from. That which came down, must ultimately go back up to where he came from. Jesus' ascension offers hope for our own ascension because of the promise of eternal life.

The narration from the Acts of the Apostles mirrors the perplexing stories at Easter dawn when angels provided much needed answers to the wanderings of the disciples who had gone looking for the body of the risen Messiah. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The angels asked the women. “He is not here, but has risen” Mark's gospel recounts the story this way “Don't be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go; tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’ Don't we all need answers to our wandering questions? Don't we all look up to the sky and look inside the empty tomb for answers to nagging questions? Don't we all hope that someday somehow, an angel will suddenly appear and answer our questions or at least provide us with some directions? Sometimes I wonder if our hopes are misplaced or we look at the wrong places for answers or if even our timing is accurate.

Beginning with the wedding at Cana, Jesus always pleaded that his hour to glorify God was not yet up. Nevertheless, Jesus was like a mystery that kept unfolding the glory of God. Through his miraculous acts, Jesus made visible God's divine power. Every single act was a sign and an insight into the character and mind of God, which was one full of glory. It was a kind of glory which was so much about God, but was dependent on humans as well. Jesus' contemporaries did not associate him with being the son of God, those who went to him seeking signs, directions or answers affirmed his gift as being from God. Remember Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the middle of the night and says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Those signs which tell of the glory of God, answer our questions, provide us with some direction and generate more than enough hope in each one of us.

See, God's glory depends on people like you and I. God's glory is our glory, for God's glory can only be made manifest in humans. For that reason, we always have to present ourselves as empty vessels that need to be filled and also made available to be used. There is a parable of Zen Master and a young man who sat down to drink tea together. The Master poured tea into the young man's cup until the tea overflowed and spilled onto the table. "What are you doing?" Cried the surprised young man. The master responded: "You are like this cup. You're so full of yourself that nothing can get in." How then do I empty myself in order to be filled? Embrace suffering, Peter's letter suggest. Be humble. Fix your eyes on God. Be alert to the fact that it is in God's suffering love that God was able to glorify Himself in His chosen Messiah.

George Hunsinger in his book *Disruptive Grace* says: "Christ's blood is a metaphor that stands primarily for the suffering love of God. It suggests that there is no sorrow God has not known, no grief he has not borne, no price he was unwilling to pay, in order to reconcile the world to himself in Christ...it is a love that has endured the bitterest realities of suffering and death in order that its purpose might

prevail...the motif of Christ's blood signifies primarily the depth of divine commitment to rescue, protect, and sustain those who would otherwise be lost." The time indeed came for God to glorify himself. And the height of God's glory was in the crucifixion of Jesus. In Jesus, God's glory was present in the crucified Jesus. And it is for the sake of those who would otherwise be lost that Jesus offers this high priestly prayer.

In the prayer, Jesus calls for protection and for a kind of oneness which defies every measure of difference there is-that those for whom he prays may be one as he and the father are one. That was one short prayer with a lot of hope. Jesus was very much aware of the difficulties and challenges that his followers will face. They will need protection, but above all, they will have to be united for the task ahead.

Jesus' prayer was not only about a need, but it was also a prayer about the human condition. It wasn't a prayer that was meant to dismiss human differences. The human condition as it were is one torn apart by every shred of difference. How can we be one like the father and the son? For me, the oneness is not a question of being one in thought, prayer and even faith.

It is about the human ability to speak that one universal language which everyone understands. It is the language of compassionate love, the kind of love which is meant for those who are different. That compassionate love is awakened neither by beauty, nor by any desire for sameness or domination but by a shared joy in our humanness.

This universal language upholds the idea that whereas God's love is about the liberation of the enslaved sinner, the love of the liberated is the calling to mind, the remembrance of his or her liberation and the new life in freedom. The universal language affirms that whereas the love of God is compassion, the love of the liberated is not only to glow in the joy of his or her liberation but also the liberation of others.

It is a language that helps us ascend by transcending that which makes us want to hold on to finite particularities; and more importantly provides us with a reason to hate. To think about the tragedies in Portland-where a white supremacist killed two people, the terror attack in Manchester or the killing of Coptic Christians in Egypt, makes me believe ever more deeply in our task to create a world where Oliver-the newly baptized will grow to understand that the oneness that Jesus prays for hinges on our collective embrace of that universal language.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. We honor all soldiers for their service to our country. And as we all know, one cannot be a soldier without committing oneself to die for the life of another. The true glory of a soldier requires a depth of emptiness and humility-values which formed the basis of Jesus' relationship with the father, and which is the pattern for our relationship with God.

Indeed, Jesus knew God. Jesus made God known to us. To know God is eternal life. John said. And to make God known is to have a relationship with God. For it is by virtue of that relationship that the glory of God is made visible. This relationship will be built on our willingness to empty ourselves in order to be filled by God, and also humbling ourselves in order to ascend to the place Christ has prepared for all, and where God's glory abounds in all its fullness. Amen.