

“Holy Father, Keep Them by Your Name”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: You may recognize this morning's Gospel reading as a portion of the prayer spoken by our Lord Jesus on the night of his arrest. It's been called his "High Priestly Prayer". And as we hear again his heartfelt words it's both humbling and comforting to realize that as he faces his imminent trial, passion, and crucifixion, with all the fearful horrors that will entail for him, he's not thinking at all of himself. No, the thoughts that preoccupy his mind are for his disciples. He is praying for them. Though very soon he will be subjected to unimaginable suffering as he gives his life an offering for sin, he's more concerned about what they will have to endure, the trials that they will face, and the temptations to which they'll be subject after he is taken away from them. Such is his selfless, abounding love for them—and for us, for certainly we are included among those for whom he prays.

And as it turns out, since we know what follows, his concerns for them are entirely justified. Soon they will be scattered, alone, and afraid. They won't understand what's happening or why. They will witness terrible things. And in their panic and confusion some will deny him. All will lose faith. And that's just the in short term. I am certain that as Jesus prays for his disciples, he is also thinking of the years to come when they will face opposition and persecution in the cause of the Gospel. He anticipates the many hardships they will have to endure for the sake of the kingdom and, no doubt, the martyr's death the vast majority of them will receive. It will not be easy for them; and, as we heard in this morning's Epistle lesson, the enemy like a prowling lion will be looking for every opportunity to exploit and defeat them. There's a lot stacked against them.

But despite all this, we detect in our Savior's prayer a strong note of confidence. His is not a prayer of hopeless desperation or wild, worried hand wringing. Instead it is with great assurance that he entrusts his disciples to his Father's care. "You gave them to me", he says, and if you'll allow me a paraphrase, "And now I hand them back to you knowing that I've done everything necessary – given them everything they need – to equip and prepare them for what lies ahead." And that's true. Even as he speaks, he is preparing to give his life on their behalf. In fact, at this point (though they don't quite understand it yet) they have already received the body and blood he will very soon sacrifice for them. And not many weeks hence he will be sending them the gift of his own Holy Spirit to illumine their minds, strengthen their faith, and lead them in his way. But, as he says in the prayer, I've already given them the key to it all: "I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they believed that you sent me." He gave them God's Word: *that's* what they needed most to stay on in the world and overcome it – because it is through the Word that the Spirit works, and it is through the Word that people receive and trust in the sacrifice Jesus made to atone for sin. It all hangs on the Word. That's how people come to know Jesus Christ sent by the only true God and Father and so receive eternal life.

And so, it has gone on through nearly two thousand years worth of generations as the Lord Jesus continues to pray for his church – and as he continues to give his disciples, young and old, himself, the benefits of his sacrifice, and his Holy Spirit through

the all powerful and all sufficient Word of God. It's precisely that which we are celebrating today: our gracious heavenly Father's always hearing and answering his Son's prayer on behalf of his chosen disciples – that is, all of us in general, but particularly today for the three young people who will very soon stand before the congregation and confess the holy faith into which they were once baptized and now wish publicly to confirm. Jesus has seen to it that they too have been given the Word of the Father. He's done this through parents, other family members, sponsors, teachers, and the ministry of the church. And through that Word the Spirit has brought them to know the Lord Jesus as the One sent by the Father, and to trust in his saving work for them on the cross.

Of course, we shouldn't think of this as something new to them. The truth is that they've known and trusted the Lord Jesus all their lives. They were, after all, reborn in his name in Holy Baptism. At that time through water and the Word the Lord Jesus claimed them as his own, washed away their sins, and gave them the Spirit to work the gift of faith in their hearts. So their faith isn't new; it's just that now, having matured in years and having received more of the Word, they've come to the point that they are able to understand and articulate clearly the major articles of the faith. Nor should we think of this as the end for them either, as if they have received all of the Word that they need. Oh no, trust me, I can personally attest that they have a *lot* more room to grow—as do we all, which is my point. Just as Jesus gave his disciples his Word, he did it with the understanding that they would remain in it, speak it to each other, rehearse it, and dwell on it so that through it the Holy Spirit would continue to deepen their insights, strengthen their faith, and conform their lives to God's design. So, they're not done – not be a long shot; but they have come to an important milestone. If we thought of their life in Christ as a house under construction, at this point you might say they have the foundation laid.

And from this point they will continue to build. What the completed structures will look like, we can't say for sure. We don't know what trials and triumphs the Lord has in store for them. We don't know what hardships they will face as by their words and actions they continue to confess the name of Jesus in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. We do know that it won't be easy. There's a lot stacked against them. And certainly, that old prowling lion hasn't given up hope of making a meal of them. But we do know this: Jesus Christ has given them his Word and with it everything they need to keep building their lives on him and his saving Gospel. So it's fitting at this point that we pause to recognize the completion of the foundations upon which they will build their lives of faith – and, yes, test them to see if they are indeed the solid rock of Christ's truth that will hold up under any pressure or if instead they are but shifting sands that will cause them to fall.

To this end, each year I ask the candidates for Confirmation to prepare a paper or to respond in writing to a list of essential questions. I do this in order to provide them an opportunity to confess their faith in Jesus their Savior and their knowledge of his Word. And so that you too can test the quality of their groundwork, I'd like to share with you some of their comments.

The Christian faith starts with God who has revealed himself to us through Jesus as a divine Trinity. Regarding this our students wrote, "God, who is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit works all things through his Word." "He is the maker of heaven and earth", and "[He] made the universe and all [in it including] us in seven

days.” Getting specific about the creation of humans they wrote: “Mankind was the crown of creation. God gave humans dominion over all things he made”, and “Man was made in the image of God.” What the “image of God” means most is that man was given the capacity to love even as God does through acts of selfless sacrifice. So, it was that Adam and Eve loved each other. And so also, they were given a means to be able to show their love for God, as one student wrote: “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a gift that allowed Adam and Eve to express their love for God.”

Sadly, our first parents fell from their blessed first estate, passing the curse of sin to all their descendants. “Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan (the snake) into eating the fruit of good and evil”, said one student. Another added, “The human condition is now very bad. [We] sin constantly and do bad things.” “I was born with a sinful nature and there is no way I can change that. And this: “sin overcomes us and makes us sin even more. It sticks with us.”

But our gracious God and Father did not want to leave us in this wretched condition and abandon us to hell. He had a plan to save us, as our students wrote, “God the Son was sent to this earth [to be] born of the Virgin Mary to save me.” “Jesus gave his life on the cross so that my sins would be forgiven.” And “Jesus Christ died on the cross for me and everyone else to take away the sin of the world.”

Our confirmands further declare that the benefits of Christ’s sacrificial death are received by faith—which itself is a gift of God. Said one, “I truly believe that [every aspect of] my salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not from any power I possess ... I did nothing on my own.” No indeed, as was mentioned before God worked in them the gift of faith at the time of their spiritual rebirth, regarding which they wrote, “With the Holy Spirit and [God’s] Word I was brought to believe in Christ Jesus and now I am saved.” And, “[At] my Baptism ... I became a part of God’s wonderful family.”

We call this family the church, which as one wrote, “... are the people of God who together confess our sins and repent of them.” Another mentioned that, “The church is the bride of Jesus.” And, “I come here to worship ... and to hear and learn God’s Word.” And also to partake of Holy Communion, about which our confirmands said the following: “The bread is Christ’s body. The wine is Christ’s blood of the New Testament.” “When we receive the Lord’s Supper, we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. It also strengthens our faith and keeps us in it.” “I want to take the Lord’s Supper to receive assurance of the forgiveness of my sins and to remember what Jesus Christ has done for me.”

Understanding the important place of prayer in the life of a Christian, one student wrote, “Prayer is heart-felt talk with God, in which I ask him for needs for other people and myself, and also thank him for things that he has provided me. I can also tell him my troubles and ask for guidance. I can pray anytime I want because I know that God will be listening, comforting, and guiding me.” Another said this: “When I say, ‘Amen’ [at the end of my prayers], I am accepting whatever God has in store for me which may not always be what I want. It’s that I know God is right all the time.”

And finally, taking off on that last statement, our confirmands have demonstrated that they are aware of the challenges that lie ahead, but that because of their faith in Christ they do not fear it. One wrote, “I want to give my life to Christ to serve him in whatever way I can. I don’t know what I want to be when I get older; but I am positive he

will take care of me and do only what he knows is best. Whatever I do, I want to do it for the glory of God and always remember that there is a place for me in heaven. I never have to worry. I will always be welcomed with open arms." And this: "The goal of my Christian faith is to rely on God to lead me through all my life during times of happiness and turmoil. I know Jesus, and so I know I have eternal salvation."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: with this that you have heard from their papers, and the public confession that they will soon make before the congregation, I think we have ample evidence that Jesus has indeed given them his Word and that the Word has not returned to him void. It has accomplished the saving work the Lord intended, grounded them firmly in the faith, and will continue to bless them as they build their lives upon it.

Therefore, for them and for all the saints who remain, as yet, in the world but not of it, let us pray with our Lord Jesus, "Holy Father, keep them by your name." And like our Lord Jesus, let us pray this with confidence, knowing that whatever hardships, trials, and testing any one of us will be required to endure, that the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!