

## **A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 21, 2006**

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In today's gospel Jesus said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you... ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:23-33). To this passage we can add two similar statements Jesus made in previous chapters of John's gospel. In John 14:13, Jesus said, "Whatever you ask the Father in my name, I will do it." In John 15:4, Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you."

These promises are part of long sections of teaching in John 14, 15 and 16 in which Jesus explained to his followers what life would be like for them after he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus would send the Holy Spirit to be with his followers in his absence.

As we discussed last week, the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit brings us into a closer relationship of union with Jesus. The Bible describes this by saying that we are literally "in Christ." Because we are "in Christ," we experience the same intimacy with the Father that Jesus himself experiences. As Romans says, "You received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, Abba, Father," (8:15-16).

Life lived in union with God in Christ through Holy Spirit is, essentially, a continuation of the life of Christ on earth. Jesus lived on earth in communion with the Father. He prayed regularly to the Father and the Father heard his prayer because he is the Son of God. We live in communion with the Father because we are children of God. We can pray to the Father and have our prayers answered also.

Perhaps the most instructive prayer of Jesus, in terms of what we are to ask for, is his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before the Passion. He prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39). This is the one instance where Jesus makes some mention of trying to avoid pain, but his desire to avoid pain is made subject to the Father's will.

Of course, if the Father had removed the cup from him, then he would not have died on the cross. If he had not died, he would not have risen and ascended. He would not have sent us the Spirit and raised us from the dead. This is a model for us. Many of the things we would have God take away are the very means by which he works most powerfully in our lives.

St. Paul understood this. He had an ailment that he referred to as a "thorn in the flesh." He writes, "I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me." And [the Lord] said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Here we can see Paul's life as a continuation of Christ's life. Paul had his own cross to bear, which God used for his sanctification.

Today's gospel, which begins with the promise that we can ask for whatever we want, ends with another promise, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." If our lives are also to be a continuation of Christ's life, we should expect our own share of the cross, our own cup. To pray that our lives will be free from pain and tribulation is to pray that our lives will be unlike Christ's life.

The power of prayer, thus, is not that it will help us to avoid the pain of life or that it will help us get everything we want. The power of prayer is that it is the means through which we bring ourselves more and more into God's will. Lest we should think this limits the effects of prayer, we should take note of the many things we know are God's will and for which we can pray with confidence.

We know God wants us to be forgiven because he sent his Son to die for our sins. We know God wants to help us avoid temptation. We know God wants to give us wisdom (cf. James 1:5). We know God wants us to grow in virtues like patience and self-control and, above all, in faith, hope and love.

We know God wants to give us joy and peace. Jesus said, "Ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." Joy is the gospel's answer to our cultural notion of happiness. Happiness depends upon good health and prosperity in outward circumstances. Joy is the product of union with God in Christ and can be experienced without regard to our circumstances.

Jesus said, "These things I have spoken unto you that in me you might have peace." Peace is that inner sense of rest and wholeness that comes to us because our sins are forgiven and we have been reconciled to God.

Prayer in the name of Jesus focuses on things that last into eternity, things that pertain to the salvation of our souls. As Jesus said, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). As we grow in faith and wisdom, we come to see that the things that are in accordance with God's will are the better and lasting things. For example, the virtues that we grow in through our participation in the cross are greater than what we would have if God simply gave us all the things we wanted. God wants us to be saints, not spoiled children.

As Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:27).