

# The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:15-17, 20A, 20C-26
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 4:11-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord. I will come back to you, and your hearts will rejoice.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:11B-19

The readings for the Seventh Sunday of Easter continue our journey through the Gospel of John — and in particular through the Last Supper discourse in John — with a quote — a section — from Jesus’ famous prayer in John 17, often called his high priestly prayer that he made during the account of the Last Supper and before his passion began in the Garden of Gethsemane. So that’s going to be the gospel for today. Before I look, though, I just want to point out: notice these are the readings for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. And, it might be important to keep in mind that the reason there are seven Sundays in Easter, the reason there are seven weeks is because during the Easter season we’re celebrating the time between the Passover, which is when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, and then the ancient Jewish feast of Pentecost, which was named Pentecost after 50 days, because it took place seven weeks — plus one day, you know seven times seven is forty nine plus one day — on the 50th day after the Jewish celebration of Passover. So, I just bring this up because all of our seasons, like Lent for example, the reason it’s six weeks is because it’s modeled on the 40 days of Jesus in the desert. Likewise, the Easter season — the reason it is seven weeks long or 50 days long is because it’s modeled on the time period between Passover and Pentecost in ancient Judaism. So we’re in the seventh week of Easter getting ready for the feast of Pentecost and during that time the church gives us Jesus’ teachings from the Gospel of John. So, let’s look at this final teaching from Christ in John 17:11-19. That’s the reading for this week.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said...Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so let's see what can we say about these verses? The first thing I would want to highlight here is just once again that the context is Jesus' final prayer before his passion begins. That's really special and really significant. It's one of the very few times in the Gospels that we in a sense get a window into Jesus' prayer life, into what Jesus talked about with the Father when he prayed. Sometimes people assume that we get that through the Our Father because people will call it the Lord's Prayer. But, we don't ever have any evidence that Jesus himself prayed the Lord's Prayer. When we called it the Lord's Prayer, we mean the prayer that was given to us by the Lord when the disciples asked him — you know, Lord teach us how to pray. And, we get a little bit of a window in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is in his agony. But, it's short; it doesn't tell us a lot about the words spoken by Jesus to the Father. John 17 is unique, though, because it's an entire chapter, an extended account, of Jesus' prayer — not just any prayer but his final prayer before his passion. And, so I would just highly encourage you to meditate on this particular passage — it's a very very rich and fruitful window into the interior life of Jesus as Son praying to the Father in the Spirit. It's a very Trinitarian prayer. The second thing is that the Catechism refers to this prayer as the “High

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Priestly Prayer” of Jesus. And, that terminology has been used for a couple hundred years to describe this prayer in particular because it is very much an intercessory prayer of Jesus — is not just talking to the Father, he's interceding with the Father on behalf of his disciples and, in fact, on behalf of the whole world, on everyone — on behalf of everyone who will believe through them.

So, there's a specifically intercessory dimension to this particular prayer. And, in that context we'll notice a few themes stand out as important. Number one: the theme of unity amongst his disciples. So, Jesus says here when he prays for the disciples he prays that they might be one even as we are one. So, think about that for a second. Jesus isn't just praying for a lack of discord between his disciples; he's praying that the unity that his disciples would have with one another would be the same unity that he has with the Father. That is a radical kind of unity, because as we know in the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are perfectly one. They are so perfectly one that we describe them as not three gods but as one God — this is the mystery of the Trinity. We have three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but only one God. They share the same divine nature; they are the one God revealed to us in the Old Testament. And, so Christ is revealing here that on the eve of his passion one of his deepest prayers is for his disciples to have that kind of perfect Trinitarian unity amongst themselves. Obviously, not in the exact same kind because although we share our human nature we are distinct persons, we're separate from one another in ways that are different than the unity of the Trinity. But, there's an analogy that he's calling for there because we've seen over and over again in the Gospels that Jesus says the Father dwells in him and he is in the Father and he wants to bring us into that same mutual indwelling, to bring us into that unified life of the Trinity in which the bond of unity is in fact the Holy Spirit himself. So, the prayer that they may be one — and I highlight here the Latin words — not that the Gospel is originally Latin — the Latin Vulgate translates this as *ut unum sint* — “that they may one.” We're going to come back to that in a minute. It's going to be the title of John Paul II's famous encyclical on the unity of Christians. I just want to highlight that's where the title is going to come from. It's going to come from that opening verse of John 17:11. That's the first point - he prays for unity.

A second thing he intercedes for with the disciples is their protection from the devil, their protection from evil. This is very important. He says here that he has

guarded the disciples, he's protected them during their time with him during his public ministry and that none of the disciples was lost except for one. He calls him the "Son of Perdition." Obviously, this is a reference to Judas, right, who betrayed Jesus who sold him — sold him out out so to speak — for 30 pieces of silver and who abandoned the Lord and the other apostles. This is one of the reasons this expression — "Son of Perdition" — that the ancient church fathers regarded Judas as actually not just having sinned against the Lord as Peter did, he denied him, but actually as having failed to repent and as having been damned. It was widespread belief in the early church that Judas did not repent, that he despaired and that he was not saved. And, one of the reasons the Church Fathers thought this is because Jesus calls him the Son of Perdition. The Greek word there for perdition — *apóleia* — means the son of destruction. It's a term that gets used to describe the damned elsewhere. In fact the same expression is used by Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians to describe what we call the antichrist — this figure of evil who will come at the end of days and who claims to be God and will oppose Christ and persecute the church. Paul calls the antichrist the son of perdition or the son of damnation. I just bring this up because it's kind of an important window into the fact that first, that Christ prays for the protection of his disciples, but that in the mysterious plan of providence things don't look well for the eternal destiny of Judas amongst the 12. For Jesus to call you the son of damnation or the son of perdition is a very ominous thing, indeed. It's a very serious thing, indeed. In fact, it makes Judas out to be a kind of little antichrist. He's kind of like a prefiguration of the kind of evil that Paul describes preceding the final coming of Christ at the end of time.

In any case, Christ continues to talk about his prayers for protection for the disciples, and he also adds a certain nuance to it. He says, "I do not pray that you should take them out of the world but that you should keep them from the evil one." Now, what does that mean? Well, this is important. Jesus, here, is praying for the apostles in a particular way, in a primary way, they are the recipients of his intercessory prayer. And, unlike certain Saints throughout the centuries — like certain religious orders, maybe the Carmelites or some of the hermits or monks in the deserts — in the ancient church in the fourth or fifth centuries, the apostles were not called to a life of withdrawal from the world, or seclusion, or being cloistered. The apostles were kind of the ancient equivalent of what we would call today diocesan bishops, or secular priests, or diocesan priests. They were meant to be out in the world sharing the good news, evangelizing people, preaching the gospel. And, so Jesus here

prays — he says, “I don't pray that you should take them out of the world, Father, but that you should protect them from the evil one.” In other words, that you should guard them from the devil, guard them from the very one who had entered into Judas and led Judas to go astray, to betray Christ and become the son of perdition. So, I think this is a fascinating prayer for two reasons: first, it's a striking parallel with the Our Father, right? Think about it: in the Lord's prayer what do we say? “Deliver us from evil.” That's the final line of the Lord's prayer. In the original Greek the word for evil is ambiguous; it can refer to a person. In other words you can translate it equally well as “Deliver us from the evil one.” In other words, “Deliver us from Satan.” So you see a little bit of a parallel here between Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 and the Our Father that he gives to the apostles. In other words, Jesus prays for the apostles protection just like he teaches us to pray for our protection from the devil. So there's an element of spiritual warfare as well in Jesus' high priestly prayer.

At the same time, though, he is praying, I think, in a special way not just for the apostles but for all of their successors and all of the priests who would be ordained by bishops and who would engage in that ministry of not being separated from the world but be evangelists in the world. Because, let's face it, the apostles and their successors are really on the front lines of the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the evil one. And so, Jesus here is giving a special prayer for their protection in the midst of doing that work of evangelization.

The third element of this quote from the high priestly prayer that is interesting to me is the concept of holiness that Jesus uses in this prayer. You'll notice here that he says, “They are not of the world even as I am not of the world.” Right? And, then he says in verse 17, “Sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth.” What is that talking about? Well, the Greek word here for sanctify — *hagiazō* — is based on the root, *hágios*, that means — from which we get the word holy, right? So, the Greek word for holy has a very similar connotation to the Hebrew word for “holy” — *kadosh*. The denotation, the translation of the word holy is simply “set apart” right — to be set apart. When you consecrate something you set it apart, right? So, like when the priest consecrates the bread or consecrates the wine, he's setting it apart to become the body and the blood of Christ. He's making it holy, right? So, Jesus here is praying for his disciples and he is saying they are not of the world. In other words, they are set apart from the world. So, there's a certain sense of holi-

ness there, right? But they're also set apart for something else, and what they set apart for? He says, "Sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth." So, they're set apart from the world — meaning the following sinful world — and they're set apart for the truth. And, that's the essence of the consecration of the disciples. They are being made holy; they are being set apart so that they can be evangelists; so that they can bring the truth to a world that is desperately in need of it; so that they can bring the truth to the very world that God loves so much that he gave his only begotten son in John 3:16.

Now, what's interesting about this concept of holiness that you might miss if you're just reading the English translation is that in using this terminology to describe the disciples being "sanctified" or "consecrated" or "made holy," Jesus is actually echoing the language of the Septuagint, the language of the Old Testament, with reference to priestly ordination. Very important here — so one of the reasons people call this the high priestly prayer is that Jesus uses this verb of sanctify, consecrate, make holy, which was the same verb used to describe the ordination of priests in the Old Testament. So, for example, if you go back to Exodus 29:1, the chapter that describes the ordination rite for priests in the Old Testament actually uses the exact same verb in the Greek Old Testament. It says, "Now this is what you shall do to consecrate them [or sanctify them] that they may serve me as priests" — Exodus 29:1. The Greek Septuagint there — the word is *hagiaseis* — it's the same word Jesus uses — *hagiazō* — "sanctify them" just as the priest in the Old Testament were sanctified. Make them holy just as the priests in the Old Testament were made holy when they were ordained. And, sure enough if you look at that last line notice what Jesus says, "For their sake I sanctify myself. I consecrate myself that they also might be consecrated in truth." What does that mean, I consecrate myself, I sanctify myself? Well, it shows here that Jesus is going to the cross; he is setting himself apart as both priest and victim, as both priest and sacrifice, in his passion, his death and his resurrection. And, so through his passion death and resurrection he's going to consecrate his apostles to be the priests of the new covenant.

So, I just bring this up because you know sometimes people will say — especially a lot of non-Catholic Christians will say, "There is no ministerial priesthood — you know, all there is is the common priesthood of all believers." And, while it's certainly true that all believers are sanctified through the waters of baptism, and all be-

lievers are made holy through the sacraments of initiation, the reality is, though, Christ himself has a special consecration that is reserved for the apostles alone at the Last Supper. And, that's the consecration unto what we call the ministerial priesthood. So, in this prayer Jesus is describing himself with the language of the priesthood. But, he's also describing his disciples with the language of the priesthood in a special way.

So, if you have any doubts about that you can actually turn to the first reading for this week, which is from the Acts of the Apostles 1:15 and following. So, we've been working through the book of Acts over the course of the Easter season but in this instance the church actually brings us back to the beginning of the book to look at the replacement of Judas, the apostle, with Matthias so that the college of the 12 apostles would be complete.

In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty), and said, "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry.

For it is written in the book of Psalms, ...`His office let another take.'

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us -- one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsab'bas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthi'as. And they prayed and said, "Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthi'as; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.

So, what do we make of this passage. In my experience as a teacher this is one of the most puzzling passages in the New Testament, primarily because of the method of choosing the next apostle. I mean — you can imagine a situation where maybe

the apostles would get together and pray and then take a vote so that they could decide who was going to be the next successor of Judas, kind of like in a papal conclave as we do today. When one pope dies the bishops will gather — cardinals I should say — will gather together, they'll pray, they'll cast ballots and then whoever wins the vote will take the role of the Bishop of Rome. But, that's not how the apostles do it. In this case they appear to gamble. They cast lots, right, to decide who's going to take Judas' place. And, so the question becomes why are they doing this and what's the significance of it. So, let's answer that question. The first and most important point we want to make is this: the very fact that they are replacing Judas in this way reveals that when Jesus established the 12, he envisioned offices that would live beyond the life of the particular 12 apostles themselves, right. And, you actually see this in the verse from the Psalms. Peter stands up and he says Judas is not — you know — who was one of us who had a share in this ministry but who betrayed the Lord has to now be replaced. And, he quoted the Psalm that says, "His office let another take." So, notice that the apostles are working with the idea that although Judas has died someone needs to take up his office. Now, what's fascinating there is that the Greek word for "office" is Episkope. We get the word "Bishop" from that word. It literally means "bishopric" and you'll see that in some of the older translations like the King James version or the Douay Rheims. The newer translations tend to avoid that language, but that's a very accurate translation, because what the word means here is let someone take his "office of bishop" or his "office of overseer," which by the way, we now know from the Dead Sea Scrolls was a term that could be used in Jewish circles for an elder who was set over others, who was a chief elder. He could be called the overseer, one who had jurisdiction or governance over many others. And so, Peter here is revealing that although Judas was a wicked man, although Judas was a sinner, although Christ called him the Son of Perdition, nevertheless he did have an office. And so once he died someone else needed to take his role. And, so they decide to take two of the disciples — Joseph called Barsab'bas and Matthias — and decide between them.

Now, notice here that when they are going to replace Judas it says something interesting. It says we need to choose someone who was with us all the way back to the baptism of John until the time of the Ascension. So, this is really interesting. In other words that although Matthias and Joseph called Barsab'bas may not be well known to us, they obviously were men who were part of the disciples, who were members of Jesus' entourage, going all the way back to the the baptism of John. In



other words they were witnesses to the entire public ministry of Jesus all the way up to the resurrection. So they weren't newcomers, right. So, once they decide between these two they now have to make the choice. And, in order to do this they come to the third and final element, which is they cast lots. Now, why did they do that? Well, this isn't some kind of like early form of Catholic gambling going on here. Actually, to the contrary this was a very sacred act; this wasn't a secular act. It goes back to the Old Testament, and in this case I would actually have you turn back to the Old Testament. It's not one of the readings, but in 1 Chronicles 24 and following we read these words — we discover that in the Old Testament the divisions of the priesthood were actually assigned by casting lots. So, listen to these words from the book of Chronicles:

*The divisions of the sons of Aaron* were these. The sons of Aaron: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar... With the help of Zadok of the sons of Eleazar, and Ahimelech of the sons of Ithamar, David organized them according to the appointed duties in their service. *They organized them by lot*, all alike, for there were officers of the sanctuary and officers of God... The first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah...

...so on and so forth. OK, so that's from the book of 1 Chronicles 24. And, if you read the entire chapter what you're going to see is in the Old Testament at the time of King David the priestly divisions of the sons of Aaron going back to Aaron would be organized according to lots. They would cast lots to discern the will of the Lord as to who would take the place of these various priestly offices. We actually can see this in the New Testament as well in the first chapter of Luke whenever Zechariah, it tells us — the father of John the Baptist — Zechariah it says it fell to him by lot to go into the temple at the time of incense and to offer the incense in the holy place, which was a very kind of distinguished priestly activity. So, in the Old Testament, lots — these sacred lots — and we don't know exactly what they looked like but — were cast to discern God's will as to which priest would inherit which particular office or which priest would be assigned a particular duty, like Zechariah going in to offer the incense. So, if we fast-forward back to the New Testament in the book of Acts, what this reveals to us is not that the apostles were gamblers but that they saw themselves as Jewish priests. In other words they saw the office of Judas as a priestly office. And, so just as in the Old Testament David organized the successors of Aaron by casting lots, so now in the New Testament

Peter organizes the successor of Judas by casting lots to see what God's will is regarding Matthias or Joseph called Barsab'bas. So, this is a very powerful and important text. In fact, some scholars have even suggested that Luke deliberately highlights the language of casting lots at the beginning of Acts because he wants you to think back to the casting of lots with Zechariah at the beginning of his Gospel. It's like a parallel, like bookends with the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles showing you the old covenant priesthood of Zechariah at the beginning of the gospel, and now the new covenant priesthood of the apostles at the beginning of Acts. And, I find that very compelling; I find that very convincing because it shows to us once again that although Jesus doesn't use the word "priest" to describe the apostles, they see themselves as priests very clearly just by the fact that they cast lots to choose the office of Judas' successor.

OK, so with those two points in mind then, the Psalm for this week bridges the gap between the first reading and the gospel simply by emphasizing the reign of God. So, this one isn't quite as specific as the Psalms sometimes are. It's a beautiful psalm; it's one of my favorite ones. It's Psalm 103, and you can read the whole thing yourself if you want to get a sense of the fullness and richness and beauty of the Psalm. But, for our purposes here I would just highlight one little instance here - it's from verses 11 and 12 — just a beautiful testimony during this Easter season to the joy that we should feel because of the love of God. In the Psalm verse 10

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

And, that is certainly reason for Easter joy, to realize that God's love isn't just — it isn't just great; it's infinite love, right. Because how far — what is the exact distance between the East and the West? Well, it's an infinite distance, right? By definition, the East is as far from the West as is possible. And, that is how much God loves us; that is how much love he has shown for us in the passion, death and above all in the resurrection of his son during this Easter season.

So, with that in mind I'd just like to close here with a final reflection going back to the gospel for this week — Jesus' prayer for unity amongst his disciples. And, I'd like to call your attention to one of my favorite papal encyclicals. This is from St. John Paul II - the encyclical is entitled *Ut Unum Sint*, on commitment to ecumenism. And it's an encyclical on Christian unity, on unity amongst churches. Because as you'll know just from looking around, there is a great scandal in the church today, which is the division among Christians. It's a real stumbling block for people coming to believe in the truth of the gospel. And, in response to the situation John Paul II wrote this encyclical and he takes the opening words from our Gospel today — Jesus' prayer, "That they may be one" — and he makes that the title of this encyclical on Christian unity and on ecumenism — unity amongst the Christians of the world. And, so I would just like to close this presentation with a quote — one of my favorite quotes from the encyclical. And this is what John Paul II said about our commitment to Christian unity in light of Jesus' prayer that we read today:

Jesus himself, at the hour of his Passion, prayed "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at *the very heart of Christ's mission... To believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity. Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer: "Ut unum sint".*<sup>2</sup>

That they may be one. That's from paragraph nine of the Pope's encyclical on ecumenism. And, the part of that line that strikes me the most is when the Pope says to believe in Christ means to desire unity. In other words, ecumenism and a commitment to ecumenism, a commitment to unity amongst Christians, isn't just a kind of take it or leave it proposition, like "I'm an ecumenical Christian" or "I'm not an ecumenical Christian." No. The Holy Father is saying there that to be a Christian is to desire unity amongst Christians because Christ himself made this his final prayer. This was the last thing he prayed for before his passion. So, obviously this

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 9 [May 25, 1995]

is one of the deepest desires of his heart that his disciples, his apostles, that all who believe in him would be one. And, so in this time where there is so much division amongst Christians, let's all take up that clarion call from John Paul II and ultimately from Christ himself to make Christ's prayer for unity amongst Christians our own.