

GOOD FRIDAY

Westminster Cathedral

Today we stand before our crucified Lord. As we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews, in Jesus we have the supreme high priest. It is with this truth in our hearts that we approach him today on this Good Friday.

Throughout this Holy Week we are reflecting on the encouraging words of Pope Benedict, spoken in this Cathedral:

‘Let us pray that the Catholics of this land will become ever more conscious of their dignity as a priestly people, called to consecrate the world to God through lives of faith and holiness.’

Today, as we gaze on Jesus hanging on the cross we acknowledge him to be our high priest, the one who presents himself, in his emptiness, to his loving Father on our behalf. Today, as in every moment of prayer, we unite ourselves to Christ that we may become part of his offering, his prayer to God, who is the same God and Father of us all.

The Letter to the Hebrews is so encouraging. ‘Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heavens, we must never let go of the faith we have professed.’ So today is a day for strengthening our faith, and particularly our faith in Jesus, the Lord, who is now eternally in the presence of his Father interceding for us in his everlasting priesthood.

There are so many things on which we could ponder this afternoon. But here are two, briefly put, that can direct and guide us in our own prayer as a priestly people.

On the cross, Jesus cried out: ‘I thirst’ and he was given vinegar, sour wine, to drink. Here are strong echoes of the Old Testament and of the Psalms, in particular. In Psalm 69 the just man, in his suffering, laments that ‘for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.’ Jesus is that just man, every just person, exposed to suffering and distress. Here we are also reminded of the image of the vineyard. God plants a vineyard on a fertile hillside, but all it yields are wild grapes. As Pope Benedict says: ‘The vineyard of the Lord fails to yield for God the noble fruit of justice, which is grounded in love. It yields only the sour grapes of man who is concerned only for himself.’ (Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week p.218) Let us not yield only sour grapes. Let us rather present the Lord with the gift of forgiveness of those who have wronged us and compassion to those who are burdened. Let us thirst for the beauty of God’s truth just as Jesus thirsts for us to come to him. In this way we play our part in consecrating our world to God today.

In his last moments, Jesus also cries out ‘It is finished, it is accomplished.’ His great task is complete. All that remains is for the Father to complete his task: that of raising Jesus to new life.

What exactly is the task of Jesus? It is that of bringing to the Father, the whole world, summed up in his body, for he is truly both God and man, the Word through whom all things are made. In this way Jesus consecrates our world. As priest he hands it over to God, right unto the end, until all is accomplished. And the sign of it being accomplished is the piercing of his side so that the last drops of blood and water are shed.

This happens at the very hour when the lambs of the Jewish liturgy are being slaughtered in the Temple. In Jesus that form of worship comes to an end, for he is now the Lamb of God who takes away from the world the ultimate effects of our sin. In this way, too, he is our high priest and in him all our prayers for forgiveness and mercy find their answer. This is now the new, true worship for now his body is the new Temple, and, most remarkably, we are now that body.

My brothers and sisters, here is the greatness of our calling: to be the Body of Christ in our world; to be the focus of true prayer, the point at which all the world's troubles are raised up before God in union with Jesus. This is the great dignity of being a priestly people called to consecrate the world to God through lives of holiness and faith.

So, as we approach the cross this afternoon to venerate the Lord at the end of our Liturgy, and as we come to receive his Body and Blood in Holy Communion, let us keep in mind the words from the Letter to the Hebrews we have heard:

'Let us be confident then in approaching the throne of grace that we shall find mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help.'

This is our true place: at the foot of the cross, ready to venerate our Lord, to receive him with love and to be those who will continue in our lives his work of bringing all things to God for healing and redemption.

Amen

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