

The Prayer Beside the Altar

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of oneness in the Church, which is rooted in the glory of the Father and the Son, and is made possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: John 17:1

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "The Glory of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of John 17, referred to as 'The Prayer Beside the Altar,' where Jesus, as the High Priest, communicates intimately with the Father before His sacrifice. This prayer highlights three key themes: the glory of the Father and the Son, the oneness among believers, and the Church's testimony to the world. Sparks asserts that true unity and glory are rooted in the resurrection and the sacrificial work of Christ, which cannot be manufactured by human effort. He calls for believers to focus solely on Christ to impact the world effectively, as the Church embodies the life of Christ through the Spirit. Ultimately, the prayer serves as a challenge to live in the reality of this divine unity and glory.

Transcript

That part of the gospel by John which we have now reached has come to be known under two titles: "The High Priestly Prayer" and "The Holy of Holies." We might well combine them and speak of John 17 as "The High Priest in the Holy of Holies." This chapter stands with the most sacred, beautiful, heart-searching, profound and awe-inspiring chapters of the whole Bible. There is no fathoming its depths or exhausting its fullness. Marcus Rainsford has written a book of 454 pages on this chapter alone, and yet we feel that he has only touched the surface. Certainly we can do no more here than seek to underline the main message and emphasize the essential challenge.

When we speak of this prayer as that of the High Priest in the Holy of Holies we are not altogether right. What we mean is that we are allowed to hear the innermost converse between the Son and His Father; the most sacred and intimate breathings of His heart in the most solemn communion of the nearest place to God. But as to the actual position occupied at that moment, He had not yet reached the Holy of Holies, for the sacrifice had not yet been offered, nor the blood shed. We should therefore be more correct to refer to this as

The Prayer Beside the Altar

Christ had already taken the place of the Jewish Feasts, the Temple, the Vine, etc. Now here He takes the place of the High Priest. He is about to offer the Whole Burnt Offering, wholly and utterly set apart to God ("consecrated," vs. 19). He will seal His intercession with His own Blood.

The predominating words in any given part of the Bible always notify and indicate the immediate subject or message. It is not difficult, indeed it is very easy, to recognize such words here. They distinctly denote three things.

(1) The glory of the Father and the Son, and that glory imparted to the disciples: verses 1, 5, 10, 22, 24.

(2) The oneness of the Father and the Son; of the disciples and the Son and the Father; and of the disciples themselves: verses 21, 22, 23.

(3) The world. While it is true that the Lord says that He prays not for the world, there is much that indicates a real concern that the world should be convinced to the point of believing. "That the world may believe...": verses 21, 23.

The more we meditate upon these three things above mentioned, in the light of other things said by Jesus, the more convinced we shall be that they are not three things at all, but one.

The glorifying of the Father and the Son, and the effectual testimony of the Church to the world, will be by the reality of unity or oneness in that Body.

But it is imperative and essential that we understand the meaning and nature of both glory and union. These two go together and are inseparable.

Because the matter is not mentioned specifically by name in this prayer, it might be thought to be either irrelevant or importing something not inherent when we say that, both through our Lord's own words recorded in this Gospel and in much of the New Testament -

The Glorifying of the Father and the Son Is in Resurrection

If this is truly so, as we shall show it to be, then it would not be irrelevant if our Lord, with His Cross and death immediately before Him, in beginning His prayer with "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee," had resurrection definitely in mind. This surely is borne out by such further thoughts as: "Glorify thou me... with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (vs. 5), and: "I am no more in the world... I come to thee" (vs. 11), and: "Father, that which thou has given me, I will that, where I am, they also may be with me; that they may behold my glory..." (vs. 24).

If we look elsewhere in this Gospel we shall find two very explicit instances of the uniting of glory with resurrection. In chapter 11 the raising of Lazarus is definitely and positively said to be "for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified...." In chapter 12 the enquiry of certain Greeks to see Jesus draws from Him firstly the statement: "The hour is come" (note these words again in the prayer of chapter 17) "that the Son of man should be glorified"; then the simile of the grain of wheat dying and rising in much fruitfulness. All that immediately follows in the context is instructive in this relationship.

If glory is the expression of the satisfaction of Divine nature with Divine work - as it truly is - then resurrection is the Divine attestation that God's nature is wholly satisfied, and glory follows.

Then we have to take the second step.

The Ground of Resurrection Is the Ground of Oneness

If oneness is the basis of the glorifying of the Father and the Son, then this oneness is projected beyond the Cross to the ground of resurrection. Those who are to bear testimony, by their oneness, to the glory of God, are those who stand firstly on the ground of the full satisfaction of the Divine nature in what the Son did at the Cross, and then in the oneness of a new life in resurrection. There is no glory without the perfect sacrifice and work of the Cross. There is no glory until that has been attested by God's unique act of resurrection. There is no oneness, no unity (of the kind for which Christ prayed), until those concerned have entered experimentally and actually into the meaning of the Cross substitutionally and representatively and into the power and life of the Risen Lord!

How true this was in the case of the disciples themselves!

That leads to the third step.

Oneness Is Organic, as Being a Matter of Another Life

The unity envisaged in Christ's prayer can never be organized, arranged, agreed upon, or in any way brought about, by men. On the other hand, it is nonsense to talk about "that they all may be one" and be committed to any manmade association which insists that there is an essential and basic distinction between itself and all others. Vested interests in Christian activities are one of the main causes of disunity.

The unity of John 17 is the unity of one life. That life is not the life of the natural man, however religious and devout. It is the life with its nature and energy of One who, taking the place of the natural ("soulical") man, put that man away as having no acceptance with God, and, having done so, lives as another order of man in God's pleasure. Hence, oneness is only "in Christ," and by His resurrection life overcoming the rejected man that was.

The history of all divisions is the demonstration of one fact: that, somewhere, somehow, the life and power of "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" has been thwarted by the asserting of the life which was condemned and executed representatively at the Cross of Christ.

But - Jesus prayed, and a vast multitude has come into - at least the beginning of - the answer.

His new and other life has been received by that multitude all down the centuries, and when we meet on the ground of Christ alone, closing our eyes to the extras or deficiencies - the more or less than the fullness and aloneness of Christ - there is that in each which makes a spontaneous response to the other. Christ is ours and we are Christ's!

What a joy it is to meet a Christ-indwelt person in this Christless world! And what blessing flows, what glory warms the heart - until - until we bring up that which never had its origin or source in His resurrection, but came in later through man's unspirituality. Then the shadow creeps over and the glory fades.

What is the upshot of it all?

Let Christ be our only and utter interest. Be prepared to put our "Christian" things aside if they should in the slightest degree threaten the glory.

Thus, then, and only thus, will the Church register a convincing impact upon the world, and be "terrible as an army with banners."

"Father... glorify thy Son...."

"O Father, glorify thou me...."

"Holy Father, keep them...."

"I pray... that thou shouldst keep them...."

"I pray... that they may all be one that the world may believe...."

"that they may be one...; that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know...."

"that they may behold my glory...."

"O righteous Father... that the love wherewith thou lovedst me may be in them, and I in them."

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