

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 16, 2010  
Acts 1:12-26; Rev. 22:20; John 17:20-26

*“The Prayer of the Church”*  
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Let me begin by wishing each of you a happy Exaudi! In the church for many years the Sundays had Latin names which were based on the introit or entrance song for the day. Some of those names were continued into our Lutheran services, especially for the Sundays after Easter. The Seventh Sunday of Easter was known as Exaudi which means “hear” and even the introit in our current services continues that tradition when it begins: “Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer” from the opening verse of Psalm 61. We call upon God to hear us. That emphasis on prayer is very fitting on this day as all three of the Scripture readings contain prayers which we will note. In fact, the theme for this sermon is based on that very fact: “The Prayer of the Church”

The fact that prayer appears to be a special emphasis on this day is also fitting considering the time of the church year which we are observing. It is still a Sunday of Easter but the Paschal Candle has been extinguished. We have observed the Ascension of our Lord last Thursday. Well, at least some of us did. With the disciples we are waiting for Pentecost, for the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a Sunday of expectation.

I. The Disciples’ Prayer

In the first lesson from the book of Acts it is recorded about the disciples that following the Ascension: (Acts 1:14) “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” As the waiting disciples were in prayer so we should be as well. But the prayer of the disciples was even more specific. Peter speaks to all those gathered and they go about the task of selecting a disciple to serve in the place of Judas Iscariot who had betrayed the Lord Jesus. As part of that process they put forward two people and all pray before they go about the task of choosing: “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” They prayed for guidance in their choice and Matthias was chosen. So we too pray that the Lord would direct our lives. The disciples’ prayer was surely the prayer of the church.

I. Christ’s Prayer

The prayer of the church is also the prayer of Christ himself. In the three year series of readings which we follow, the Gospel for this Sunday in the church year is always from John 17, the Great Intercessory or High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. This year the Gospel is the

concluding words of that prayer. Here we see most assuredly that our Lord is praying for His Church. Indeed as he begins in our text: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Jesus spoke these words on the night of his betrayal. Yet even in that moment, facing certain agony and death on the cross, he kept the goal in mind. He was praying for us. He was praying for his church, those who would believe in his blood bought sacrifice. Those who would hear the word proclaimed by his disciples and would follow Him. What a beautiful example of prayer this is.

Jesus would continue: "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." Now anyone who looks at the state of Christendom today might well ask whether this prayer of Jesus has any basis in reality. The thousands of denominations who call themselves Christian appear to be anything but one. Even within church bodies and synods there are divisions and disagreements. The same can even be seen in congregations where often divisions and disagreements become very evident. But we must remember that these words of our Lord remain true for He speaks of the unity of faith of the holy Christian church which is made up of all believers everywhere, of every time and place who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is a unity which the Christian church here on earth must confess even as it strives to manifest it in truth and love in this world. For the prayer of Jesus remains ever true: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" Jesus prayer has an eternal purpose. He wants us all to be with him forever. That is the ultimate victory which is ours. So the Lord concludes his prayer: "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." With these words our Lord Jesus Christ shows us the great love He has for us and the great gift which is ours in Him. For Christ's prayer is the prayer of the church.

## II. The Church's Prayer

Even as Christ prays, the church must pray as well. Several weeks ago, we observed the National Day of Prayer. Once again, some of our members went out and solicited prayer requests from our neighbors in this community. It was interesting once again to see the kind of things for which people request prayers. In fact, what should be the content of the church's prayer? In these days there are so many things for which we should pray. Scripture indeed exhorts us to pray for all men, for all things, that we might live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty. Jesus reminds us, Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you. There are so many things to ask. Even as week after week we bring our requests before the Lord in the general prayer for the sick and the suffering, those who mourn, for those in authority, for our troops stationed in distant and dangerous lands, for so much else.

Yet surprisingly I would suggest that all these prayers while of great importance and value, as even the Lord has promised to hear and answer our prayers, are not the primary prayer of Christ's Church. As I pointed out in the introduction, this is a Sunday of expectation, between the Ascension of our Lord and the Day of Pentecost. But every Sunday is a Sunday of expectation. And the primary prayer of the Church is the prayer in the last verse of the Epistle for this Sunday. Indeed, it is the last prayer of the Holy Scripture, for it is the prayer in the second last verse of the Bible. It is a very simple prayer indeed: Amen, Come, Lord Jesus! It is the prayer in response to the promise of our Lord in the Epistle, "Behold, I am coming soon! ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Soon? After almost two thousand years of waiting? Yes, soon for with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

And the prayer is on the lips and in the heart of Christ's church. The Spirit and the Bride (that is, the church) say, "Come!" We are a people with a hope. And that hope is not bound in the things of this world, in the fading illusions, in the riches and the glory that so many seek. It is a hope that even sanctifies the graves of the blessed dead in Christ, for the grave will not hold them. It is the hope of the life which is to come, the new heaven and the new earth, the dwelling place of God with men. And in that hope we pray.

As I explained to the children many of us pray that prayer quite often though we may not recognize it as such. "Come, Lord Jesus be our guest ..." I call that prayer the "Lutheran" table prayer. I know that many other Christians know it and use it. But in many respects it is a uniquely Lutheran prayer. It identifies who we are. And yes, it is a table prayer. But it is also something much greater. For every time you say that prayer before a meal, you echo the ancient prayer of Scripture, the prayer that should be on the lips of every Christian. And as we pray, we know that it is the prayer of the church.

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

In Jesus' Name. Amen.