

The Priestly Prayer of Jesus: A Reflective Analysis of John 17

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1. Introduction

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made Him known.”¹ Chapter 17 of John’s Gospel is a revelatory note of the intimate union that exists between God the Father and His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. This prayer of Jesus is commonly known as the high priestly prayer; Jesus, the high priest of the New Testament intercedes with His Father for His disciples as well as the Future Church. A priest is a person who is set apart to stand between God and man as a mediator. John chapter seventeen is an expression of Jesus’ role as the mediator between God and men, to take God to humanity and humanity back to God.

Jesus, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, incarnated into our midst to fulfil the salvific mission of God. Even though he was human, he remained in communion with the Father through prayer. This prayer of Jesus reveals to us His deep intimacy with the Father and the unconditional love for His disciples. This is the call of every priest, to be divine and human. A priest remains in this realm of priestly holiness through his intimacy with God; he remains in the presence of God not only for himself but also for the people entrusted to his care that they too may grow into this intimacy of being with God, a reality that will be fulfilled in eternity.

John seventeen is known as the farewell prayer since Jesus prays as a culmination of his public ministry.² The prayer of Jesus is considered the prayer of consecration. He consecrates Himself for the sacrifice as both priest and victim and also the prayer of consecration on behalf of those for whom the sacrifice is offered, his present disciples that is all those who were with him in the upper room and all those who come into faith through their testimony.³ A reflective analysis of John seventeen intends to understand the nature of Jesus' intimacy with the Father and the salvific mission that each disciple is called to live in his day to day life through his consecration and acceptance of the divine will.

2. The Context of John 17

Jesus addresses His Father through the prayer on the threshold of his long-awaited hour. At the wedding feast of Cana, Jesus tells His Mother: "My hour has not yet arrived."⁴ However, now the hour has arrived wherein He gives Himself for the life of the world.⁵ Jesus prays this prayer troubled in spirit, thinking about the physical suffering that He has to endure to fulfil His redemptive mission.⁶ However, He was not disappointed, though it seems to be the hour of darkness, in reality, it is the hour of glorification that he is going to achieve through his death on the cross.⁷ The consummation of his long-awaited hour will be the most significant fact of human history.

The sinful humanity will be renewed through Jesus, who is the icon of the new humanity. In the person of Jesus, humanity will experience the restoration of freedom and life, above all the eternal life.⁸ His sacrifice on the cross creates a new order, the broken humanity which is limited by moral and social constraints, can experience the fullness of humanness and liberation from the clutches of eternal death through the re-establishment of relationship with his/her Creator. Thus, Jesus, the Second Adam becomes God's temple from which flows the rivers of living water that renews and strengthens humans to reach back to their Creator.⁹

3. The Hour of Mutual Glorification

"Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you."¹⁰ The redemptive mission that Jesus is going to fulfil is not by his effort.

Jesus said to them: "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."¹¹ The crucifixion of Jesus will glorify His Father because when He is lifted, He would draw the entire humanity to Himself and His priceless sacrifice would liberate humanity from the bonds of sin. This was the sole purpose of God the Father in sending His only begotten Son. The disobedience of humanity had broken the relationship with its Creator. Now the obedience of his Son will restore humanity in its Creator. Therefore, it is the culmination of salvation history and the moment of glorification of God the Father through his Son with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.¹²

"Glorify your Son," is Jesus' sincere plea to the Father to restore the glory that He enjoyed with His Father before the creation of the world.¹³ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him, not one thing came into being."¹⁴ Jesus requests this eternal glory not for his self-satisfaction rather to fulfil the mission entrusted to him by the Father that the Son may glorify the Father. The divine elements such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience that He was divested of to accept the true human nature, are now necessary for the development and continuation of the mission that He is going to accomplish.¹⁵

4. The Accomplished Mission

Jesus came to glorify God and make known the Father to humanity. The knowledge of God that He handed over to us is about a compassionate Father who awaits us to share His eternity with us. The mission of Jesus was to help humanity to participate in this eternal life destined for them.¹⁶ However, the world had failed to recognize Jesus as the revealer of the Father. He had chosen a group of men and women, out of the world as His close collaborators. They showed themselves to be his own by acknowledging Him as Messiah, the saviour of the world and acknowledging that his teaching came from God. Now, the redemptive mission of Jesus

will continue through His chosen ones. The redemption of the world depends on the witness of these disciples whom the Father has given Him out of the world.¹⁷

He knew their weakness, one would betray Him for thirty pieces of silver, Peter, the leader of the disciples would deny Him thrice, and all the others would run for their lives in His dark hour. At the same time, He looked at them with the insight of hope, faith, and love. He trusted in their present devotion and future potential to carry the Good News to the ends of the world and to establish the kingdom of God. The disciples would be empowered in their fragility and weakness by the assistance of the Holy Spirit so that they would continue to bear witness to Him. Through their witness, he would be glorified just as He glorifies his Father by remaining as the faithful apostle of the Father.¹⁸

5. The Act of Consecration - A Sign of the Ongoing Mission of Jesus

“Sanctify them in the truth; your Word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.¹⁹ The Father has given Him the chosen men and women out of the world as members of the kingdom of God. He instructed them, guided them, and protected them just like a mother protecting her children. However, it is time for him to depart. They are chosen out of the World. Yet, they are in the world. He is sure that in His absence the enemy could attack and destroy the mission He has entrusted to them. To persevere in this mission of building the kingdom of God they need to be sanctified or consecrated or separated from the world by the extraordinary grace of the Father.²⁰

They need to be sanctified in the truth; this truth is the Word of God, the eternal Logos of the Father, Jesus himself. Therefore, before their consecration, Jesus consecrates himself because he was sent by the Father just like he sends His disciples to the world. Jesus consecrates himself to perform the sacred task of human redemption. The authentication of the consecration of his disciples will depend on his consecration.²¹

By consecrating Himself for the salvation of humankind, holy humanity is created in the person of Jesus, a humanity which was corrupted and sinful due to the influence of sin. When the Father consecrates his disciples, the Spirit would create in his disciples, the new humanity realized in the person of Jesus through his sanctifying presence. However, if this consecration does not happen in Christ, the Holy Spirit cannot carry on this sanctifying mission. Thus, Jesus becomes the ideal of human holiness by being its saviour and his followers would become agents of the sanctification of the world.²²

6. Call to Unity: An Invitation to Trinitarian Love

“That they may be one, as we are one.”²³ Having completed his intercessory prayer for the preservation and consecration of his disciples, Jesus prays for the unity of all, the disciples and the future Church.²⁴ The unity for which Jesus prays is the unity of love, the unity that exists between the Father and the Son from eternity.²⁵ However, verse 22 does not indicate this pre-existential unity whereas the glory that the Father had given him as Son of man for his mission in the world. The same glory that the Father has given to Jesus, he gives to his disciples. It is through these human agents that the Good News and the redeeming grace will reach humanity.²⁶ The incarnation of Jesus was the supreme expression of God’s love for the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”²⁷ The disciple would be continuing this mission of Jesus, as apostles, sent by God. These words and deeds will be signs of God’s love for the world.²⁸

To continue this mission of Jesus as witnesses of his love, the disciples have to remain in his love. “Abide in my love.”²⁹ Moreover, they should enter into communion with the Holy Trinity. “Apart from me, you can do nothing.”³⁰ The disciples are going to continue the mission with the assistance of a helper, the Paraclete whom Jesus is going to send from heaven. There is an inseparable unity in the Holy Trinity. “The Father and I are One.”³¹ When they enter into this communion with the Holy Trinity, the same unity will be reflected among the brotherhood founded by Jesus. And this

brotherhood will reveal the glory of God to the world by making his name known by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus.³²

7. Conclusion

John 17 leads us to the depths of Jesus' love for His Father and His disciples. The eternal logos who was one with the Father from eternity, thanks His Father for the gift of His disciples, who are the first members of His mystical body, the Church. The group of men and women, who followed him very closely, was the precious gift entrusted to Him by His heavenly Father. He protected and nurtured them just like a mother looking after her little ones. However, the time has come for the closure of His earthly sojourn and return to His eternal glory with His Father. Therefore, He entrusts them back to His heavenly Father who has given these chosen ones to Him.

He consecrates himself for the redemptive mission that he was soon to undergo and prays for His present and future disciples who would be continuing His redemptive mission with the help of His life-giving spirit. The way of life that His disciples have chosen, and the Good News shared by Him may not be appreciated by the world. Therefore, they will encounter difficulties which will stand in the way of their following him. This is done by the enemy who tries to deviate his disciples from the promptings of the Spirit and inspiring them to live a life according to the promptings of the worldly Spirit.

Therefore, Jesus consecrates Himself for the redemptive mission that He is going to accomplish; As a result, they will be able to experience the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit with them and they will be strengthened to face all the hardships of the discipleship with hope and endurance. Jesus is not only praying for his present disciples but also for the future disciples who would be consecrated in the Holy Spirit to continue the same mission. This priestly prayer of Jesus is a consoling prayer of Jesus. It invites us to enter into communion with our Heavenly Father who has chosen us to continue the mission of Christ. It assures us that in our discipleship journey we are never alone; The Father and the Spirit who were with Jesus in all the circumstances will continue to guide his disciples. The presence of the Holy Trinity would empower a disciple to make

Jesus known, to take the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Endnotes

¹ Jn 1: 18 NRSV.

² Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 546.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition & Notes* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 328.

⁴ Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 367.

⁵ Bruce, 329.

⁶ John Marsh, *Saint John: SCM Pelican Commentaries* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977) 17.

⁷ Frederic Louis Gudet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Michigan: Kregel Publication, 1978), 884.

⁸ Waetjen, 368.

⁹ Waetjen, 369.

¹⁰ Jn 17: 1 NRSV.

¹¹ Jn 5: 19 NRSV.

¹² Waetjen, 368.

¹³ Bruce, 330.

¹⁴ Jn 1: 1-3 NRSV.

¹⁵ Gudet, 884-885.

¹⁶ Gudet, 886.

¹⁷ Bruce, 330.

¹⁸ Bruce, 330.

¹⁹ Bruce, 331.

²⁰ Bruce, 334.

²¹ Waetjen, 374.

²² Gudet, 899.

²³ Jn.17:22 NRSV.

²⁴ Ridderbos, 559.

²⁵ Bruce, 335.

²⁶ Ridderbos, 563.

²⁷ Jn.3:16 NRSV.

²⁸ Ridderbos, 564.

²⁹ Jn.15:9 NRSV.

³⁰ Jn.15:5 NRSV.

³¹ Jn.10:30 NRSV.

³² Michael. J. Taylor, *John: The Different Gospel: A Reflective Commentary* (New York: Alba House, 1983), 213.
