

THE PRAYER OF JESUS TO HIS FATHER

By JAMES QUINN

THE PRAYER OF Jesus to his Father, which forms the seventeenth chapter of St John's Gospel, has been taken as the model of ecumenical prayer. As the Abbé Couturier put it: 'Christian unity will be attained when the praying Christ has found enough christian souls in all confessions in whom he himself can freely pray to the Father for unity'.

The prayer is, of course, incomparably more than a prayer for christian unity. It will continue to feed devotion and deepen spirituality even when, as we all pray, christian unity has been achieved in its fulness. But the ecumenical use of the prayer is a legitimate one. At the same time, there is a danger that the richness of the prayer may be impoverished by an over-concentration on this one aspect.

The prayer is one of the most sublime documents in the New Testament. It is unique in its character, because only the Son can pray in exactly these words. It is unique in its scale, for nowhere else in the gospels do we find such an extended prayer of the Son to his Father. It stands arrestingly on its own, even within the great farewell discourse which is its immediate context in the Gospel of St John. Yet it fits admirably into the themes and purpose of this gospel.

It comes as the climax of the farewell discourse, to be followed swiftly by the narrative of the passion. It explores the eternal meaning of 'the hour' of Jesus into which it is inserted. It takes us back in spirit to the beginning of the discourse, in the opening verses of the thirteenth chapter. There St John provides a prologue to the second of the two books into which he divides his gospel. The first book, the Book of Signs, is introduced by the canticle in honour of the pre-existent Word that was made flesh as the Shekinah in our midst: 'we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father'.¹ The Book of Glory is introduced by the beginning of the hour when Jesus would return in glory to his Father: 'when Jesus knew that his

¹ Jn 1, 14.

hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end'.¹

The 'dramatic date' of the prayer of Jesus is the eternal 'now' of the heavenly priesthood. The context of the prayer is one of victory. The sixteenth chapter has ended on the note of triumph: 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'.² The Son stands in prayer before his Father, not as a suppliant but as the exalted Lord. The hour which has begun is the hour of glory more truly than it is the hour of humiliation and defeat, for these are the chosen means of victory. As he prays, he is conscious that his glory is already secure. He speaks as one who has already taken his seat at the right hand of the Father.

The prayer is a structural unity, with its simple but majestic themes intertwining each other. Its structure has been compared with that of the Our Father. Its themes correspond to the petitions of the Our Father, with significant differences. The first three petitions of the Lord's prayer are alone appropriate to the exalted Son. He may ask for the glorification of 'My Father', the coming of his kingdom and the doing of his will on earth. But he cannot ask for bread, for he is the giver of bread. He cannot ask for pardon, for he is the giver of pardon. He cannot, in his hour of glory, ask to be saved from temptation and delivered from the evil one, for he has already, by anticipation, triumphed over temptation and the devil. Now he prays for others, not for himself as if he were in need.

If the prayer to the Father echoes the Our Father, this fact may remind us that the Our Father is not a prayer of individuals: it is the prayer of the christian community. The prayer of Jesus is also a community prayer. Its theme is oneness: it unites in its subject-matter the three communities which are essential to the Church. These three communities are three communions: the communion between Father and Son in the eternal community of the blessed Trinity; the communion between Jesus and his apostles, the foundation-members of the Church; and the communion between the apostles and the Church of the ages still to come.

The prayer divides naturally into these three sections: (1) The Son in the glory of the Father; (2) The Community of the Apostles; (3) The Community of Future Disciples.

¹ Jn 13, 1.

² Jn 16, 33.

THE SON IN THE GLORY OF THE FATHER

(John 17, 1-5)

Jesus sums up the prayer that is to follow by the simple declaration that 'the hour' has come.

It is the hour of glory. Jesus therefore claims glory for himself.

But he does not claim it selfishly, but for the glory of his Father.

His glory is for the Father's glory because it gives him rightful power to give eternal life to the totality of creation, which has now been made over to him by the Father.

Eternal life is knowledge of (that is, communion with) the Father. It is also knowledge of (that is, communion with) the Son as the apostle sent by the Father to reveal and communicate his love.

At this moment of anticipated glory, Jesus looks back upon his earthly life. He has given perfect glory to his Father, and in doing so has brought to fulfilment the work assigned to him by his Father.

Jesus ends this movement of his prayer by once again claiming glory for himself, the glory that is his by title of divinity.

We notice that the Son prays as exalted Lord, resuming, as it were, the glory that he always has as Son. This glory he is now to possess in his human nature. The exaltation of the Son means that he now shares with the Father all glory, power and life-giving knowledge. This glory, power and knowledge he is to share with his Church. All power is given him, and over all flesh: there is no reservation, and no exclusion. The gift is total, for all was made to be one in Christ. And the gift in the hands of Christ is always for the glory of the Father: this is the eternal vocation of Christ, and the vocation of the christian.

In contemplating the prayer of Jesus, the Church is recalled to her divine origin and her divine destiny. The Church lives in the heavenly glory as well as in her earthly existence. She lives in two 'times', in two simultaneous 'hours'; her temporal course and the heavenly life. The Church, that is to say, lives by the johannine 'hour', by the paschal mystery. She lives between suffering and exaltation. She lives on earth as a great sign of her inmost reality, which comes down to earth in a mystery, in sacramental forms. Her essential life is the divine glory, her oneness with the Father in love. This is the unseen quality which is most essential to her power of renewal, and so to her power to be more one. Her oneness with the Father constitutes her deepest unity.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE APOSTLES

(John 17, 6-19)

Jesus now declares that he has communicated the saving knowledge of the Father to the apostles.

He acknowledges that the apostles are the special gift of the Father to himself.

They have received from the Father, and have been faithful to, the saving knowledge that the Son is the apostle of the Father.

Jesus acknowledges that there is a community of possessions between the Father and the Son. Among these are the apostles themselves. In them the Son is glorified.

He prays that the Father will continue the work of the Son in keeping the apostles from evil. Like the Son, they are sent into the world, but they do not belong to the world.

He prays for their unity, in the unity of Father and Son.

He prays for their success, in order that they may share the perfect joy which belongs to the exalted Son.

As the Son is the apostle of the Father, so the apostles are apostles of the Son.

He asks the Father to set them apart by a consecration to holiness and truth, just as the Son is set apart by a like consecration for their sake.

The thought of Jesus turns from his heavenly origin to contemplate his chosen companions who sit at table with him. They are, or should be but for one sad defection, the Twelve, the leaders of the New Israel. They have been chosen to found the New Israel, to go out into all the world to be the apostles of Jesus as Jesus was the apostle of the Father. They are therefore apostles of the Father: they are to reveal – and in revealing to give – the life of the Father, the love of the Father, the glory of the Father.

The Father is the source from whom all knowledge and power descend. It is he who gives the apostles their mission, who keeps them 'in his name', that is, in oneness with himself. It is he who consecrates them to holiness and truth, as he has already consecrated his Son to holiness and truth. The apostles are to share not only in the consecration but also in the joy of the exalted Christ.

The success of their mission will depend ultimately on their consecration to holiness, and on their fidelity to the word of Jesus. They are to make visible to the world their oneness with the Father and the Son, but only to the eyes of faith: the hostile world cannot

see the Father or the Son. This oneness belongs essentially to the heavenly realm, where the apostles are to be eternally one with the Father and the Son, but they are even now one with them in their communion with them on earth. It is because they are one with the Father and the Son that Jesus can look upon them as a community, the subject of his prayer and concern, as well as individual persons, each dear to his heart.

THE COMMUNITY OF FUTURE DISCIPLES

(John 17, 20-26)

Jesus prays now for all those who will respond to the testimony of the apostles.

He prays for their unity, among themselves and with the apostles.

The unity he asks for is the same kind of unity he has already asked for in his prayer for the apostles, a unity in the unity of Father and Son.

This unity is to be the way of belief for nonbelievers, the way of increase among his disciples.

To his disciples he has given nothing less than the Father's gift to himself: the glory of the exalted Son, his oneness with the Father, his communion in the Father's love.

He looks into the farthest future, and sees in vision the community of all his disciples, sharing the eternal glory and love of Father and Son.

His final word reveals his one desire, the object of his mission and that of the apostles: the communication of the Father's love, and his own mysterious presence among his disciples.

The third section of the prayer could be understood as wholly eschatological, referring exclusively to the final glorification of the Church and the consequent judgment on 'the world'. But, though we cannot entirely separate the eschatological from the historical (such is the nature of the earthly Church as the kingdom of hidden glory), it would seem that only verse 24 is wholly eschatological. The rest of the prayer refers to the historical condition of the Church.

There is a danger, in theology and in ecumenism, of over-stressing the eschatological nature of the Church, as if its whole reality were in the future. One senses the danger in a too frequent use of the terms 'the pilgrim Church' and 'the people of God', without a corresponding emphasis on the new covenant which has given identity and structure to both. The danger comes from neglecting

the 'vertical' link between the Church and the exalted Christ, and concentrating on 'the Christ who is to come'.

In fact, and we see this clearly in the prayer of Jesus, the Church is already one, though not perfectly, with the exalted Christ. The End, the *eschaton*, has already come: the End is Christ. The Church bears within her a reality that is known only by faith: the presence of Christ as the glory of God. Christ, through the Church, is present in the world under signs which manifest his glory in the heavenly places. The Church is not merely a pilgrim Church, setting its course towards heaven, but a Church united in its deepest reality with the exalted Lord, fulfilling its destiny not only by progress towards a goal but also by a deepening of its understanding of the glory of God which it bears within it as its greatest treasure.

What of 'the world'? The mission of the Church is to bring the world into the supernatural realm of oneness with the Father. It does this by revealing to the world the supernatural qualities which are its essential endowments and which are native to the heavenly realm. Of these the supreme quality, as we understand from the prayer of Jesus, is the oneness of the Church. Just as it is the oneness of Jesus with his Father that is the spring of faith for the apostles, so it is the oneness of his future disciples with Jesus and the Father, and so with one another, that is the way of belief for an unbelieving world.

What is meant by this 'oneness'? It is not simply 'ecclesiastical' unity of outward institution but the mysterious supernatural oneness with the Father in love and glory. The essential structure of the Church, its formally *ecclesial* dimension, is oneness with the Father and with Jesus. This is its glory. This is the fruit of its consecration. This is the unfathomable wellspring of its supernatural power. This is the supreme gift of the Father, and of the exalted Son in his universal lordship.

This is the essential, the christian, unity for which we pray. It is a visible unity, but visible only to the eyes of faith. It is a structural unity, revealed only in signs. It is a unity which can grow, and whose power of growth knows no limits. It is the growth of this kind of unity that alone can renew the face of the Church.

THE CHURCH IN THE PRAYER OF JESUS

When we read the prayer of Jesus, we must read it primarily as a prayer. We hear the voice of the Son communing with his Father,

not of the Master instructing his disciples. Yet the very fact of its being a communion between the Word made flesh and the eternal Father means that it is expressing a theology, and thus giving a revelation of God 'whom no one has seen': in all that he is and does and says 'the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known'.¹ We must surely be surprised and disappointed if we fail to discover interwoven with the most profound spirituality an extremely rich theology: divorce between theology and spirituality has serious consequences for both.

Is there in particular an ecclesiology to be discovered from the prayer? The question can be asked of the Gospel of St John as a whole. It has frequently been answered in the negative. But this is too sweeping a generalization. We must not expect to find in this most spiritual and theological of gospels an ecclesiology of outward structure, of Church organization. Yet there is abundant material for constructing an *ecclesial* theology of great depth. Such a theology concerns itself with the mysterious communion between Jesus and his Church, which is the essential basis of all ecclesiology. In the Book of Signs, for example, we encounter such themes as those of the new birth of baptism, of the bread of life, of the bridegroom of Israel. In the Book of Glory we meet the themes of the indwelling Spirit, of the vine and its branches, of the shepherding of the flock.

St John's ecclesiology is never far from spirituality. The Church is a divine mystery revealed in signs, to be contemplated in prayer. It is the place of the presence and activity of the life-giving Word, the sender of the Spirit. There is thus a movement descending from heaven to earth: from the Father to the Son to the twelve, and from the twelve to the community of future disciples. The movement returns to its place of origin in the heavenly places at the end of time. This pattern of movement is the pulse that beats throughout the prayer of Jesus to his Father.

The words that re-echo throughout the prayer provide synonyms for the ineffable reality which is the Church. There is an equation between such words as 'glory', 'oneness', 'love', 'presence', 'holiness', 'truth', because each describes some important aspect of the communion between Jesus and his Church. Throughout there is a strong stress upon real unity. The prayer explores unity at three levels. The essential pattern of unity – the eternal source of all oneness – is the real unity between Father and Son. The apostolic

¹ Jn 1, 18.

community of the twelve is formed into oneness by its unity with the Father and the Son. The community of future disciples is to be a real unity, a supernatural community, because of its oneness with the apostles and therefore with the divine community of Father and Son. The kind of oneness that runs through all these communities is not merely relational, but is based on a community of nature, without loss of personal identity. It is not a oneness of isolated individuals but is 'ecclesial', forming a true community. It is not so much concerned with outward relationships as with inward realities.

We can put this in more formally theological language. All that St John implies is at least in harmony with a fully developed ecclesiology: we can re-state it in terms of the sacramental character. The most important bond within the Church is not outward unity but ecclesial or sacramental unity. Ecclesial unity is a permanent supernatural bond which is not simply the expression of faith, hope and charity, but is the essential condition, and the true cause, of faith, hope and charity. It is based ultimately on the sacramental character, which is the christian consecration forming a priestly people.

In spite of its evangelical simplicity, the prayer of Jesus strikes echoes, in the mind of the catholic, of a high sacramental doctrine. Especially, it echoes the most important of all concepts for christian unity, viz. the permanent consecration to holiness and priesthood effected by the sacramental character of baptism, confirmation and holy order. This is the source of the oneness of the Church with itself, for these are 'collegial' sacraments, but most of all with the Father through the Son, for they unite in one great communion the three communities of the blessed Trinity, the apostolic college and the universal Church.

Too often in ecumenical discussion we are concerned with the length and breadth of christian unity, to the exclusion of its height and depth. We can explore these more important dimensions as we contemplate the prayer of Jesus. So we shall be renewed as the Spirit draws us closer to Jesus in mind and heart. It is the Spirit, the author of all spirituality, who is the key to all spiritual renewal and therefore to all reunion.