

Ascending to God

John 17:1-11; 1 Peter 4-5; Psalm 68

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

Intro

In the Gospel reading of John 17, we stand on sacred ground; we overhear Jesus talking very, very personally with his Father.

His prayer is dense with intimacy with God – and also with theology. From His relationship with His Father emanates a wealth of knowledge about God.

In this weekend, in accordance with our Church calendar, we celebrate Ascension Day – the return of Jesus Christ to His Father in heaven, 40 days after His death and resurrection. It is therefore, today, very suitable to think about this prayer of our Lord Jesus in which He asked to be restored to being with God. He prayed for His own Ascension.

Jesus prayed this prayer most likely just after having finished what we call the *Last Supper* with His disciples. They overheard Him speak with his Father in the last days of His life, when He stood on the threshold of being crucified.

1 Glory of the Father and the Son

The first remarkable aspect of Jesus' prayer is that our Lord was very conscious that He had originally come from the Father – and now He deeply desired to return home.

Jesus began his prayer with the word 'Father'. He prayed like a little child speaking to His dear parent. There was an intimate familiarity. We have become used as Christians to calling God 'Father' – but to call the distant, powerful, almighty God 'Father' was never natural for humankind.

Only by being connected with Jesus Christ through faith, we are entitled to address the Creator of heaven and earth as: *our* Father. By faith we attach ourselves to the only *true* Son of God, and this makes it possible for us to also address the Creator as *our* Father. Jesus is the true, the natural Son; we are children of God by adoption.

This prayer of Jesus is spoken out of that living union which He has had with the Father throughout eternity. If we take Jesus and His prayer seriously, there is no denial possible: Jesus understood something of Himself to have ex-

isted in eternity with God before the beginning of the world.

“So now, Father, glorify Me in Your own presence with the glory that I had with You before the world existed.”

Jesus is looking forward to being restored to the splendor that he enjoyed with the Father prior to his Incarnation. Before anything even existed, the Son enjoyed spiritual union with the Father – and in that close communion, both enjoyed the same measure of glory.

In His prayer to His eternal Father, the Son asked for the splendor that was rightfully His. When He became a human being, He emptied Himself of this eternal glory – He became a man who even washed the dirty feet of his disciples. And soon he would die in complete shame on a cross.

But when the work of the cross was completed the majesty which He had momentarily laid aside was given back to Him. This, in part, is what Jesus requested in His prayer. 'Father, restore Me to You and to living in the glory we have always shared together.'

And the reason why Jesus desired to be glorified? Was this for egocentric reasons? He desired to go back to His Father to bring *further* glory to His Father. Jesus' petition was not to receive glory for Himself independently from the Father, but he desired to be restored to his previous glory *for the sake* of the honor of his Father.

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.”

Hilary, bishop of Poitiers in France, wrote around the year 350 AD *On the Trinity*, 3.12:

“This petition of glory to be given and paid back [...] shows the same power of divinity to be in both.”

What a fine image of intimacy we read in this prayer of Jesus. And what a mutual lifting up of each other; the Father praises the Son, the Son praises the Father... The Father and the Son have, together with the Holy Spirit, existed from eternity in the most fantastic community. They

have always existed for each other, united in an eternal dance of love, peace and joy.

All communion, love, joy, and peace that we experience in our life here on earth is but a dim reflection of this intimacy that exists in God. And our own desire for this love in intimate relationships is, I believe, because we were created in the image of God.

2 Glory in might and servanthood

Let me try to define this *glory* of the Father and the Son in a few inadequate words. In Psalm 68 we have read words of praise to God:

Sing to God, sing praises to his Name;
exalt Him who rides upon the heavens;
Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
sing praises to the Lord.
He rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;
he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice.
Ascribe power to God.

On Ascension Day, we see Jesus ride the heavens, move on the clouds of the sky, returning home. An image of great authority and power. Shortly before this Ascension, He had told his disciples that He had all power in heaven and on earth – given to Him by his Father.

Here we certainly see something of the glory of the Father and Son. The eternal Creator of heaven and earth is almighty, ruler of heaven and earth. Praiseworthy!

But the glory of God is not only visible in his great and mighty power and deeds, and in the demonstrations of might and miracles by Jesus.

It is also made visible in his deeds of service. Jesus prayed:

"I glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do."

The words 'I have finished' remind us of the words of Jesus on the cross, when He said: 'It is finished.'

Jesus glorified God by his obedience - by his public honoring of the Father, even unto death.

Humanly speaking, there was little glory in crucifixion - as a method of punishment it was meant to shame and humiliate the victims – not to honor and dignify them.

But Jesus presents Himself on the altar of humiliation and prays that his offering may be acceptable to God and may honor Him.

Usually when we speak of 'glory' we think of greatness and majesty. Here, Jesus uses it very differently – for total obedience to God. For lowly service. For dying on a cross.

Real greatness is when a person descends to do lowly service for the sake of others.

St Augustine, the great Church Father from Algeria, in *Tractates on the gospel of John*, 104.3, wrote:

"Humility is the earning of glory. Glory is the reward of humility."

It greatly honored God, that in a world full of rebellious people, there was this one man whose commitment to obeying God was 100% - even if that meant his own death for the sake of other people.

And it is exactly because of Christ's willingness to set aside the glory that was rightfully His in order to save sinful and lost humans that the Father gave Him even greater glory.

St Paul would later write this to the church in Philippi:

"Therefore also God highly exalted [Jesus Christ, at Ascension Day] and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the *glory* of God the Father."

This is what we celebrate on Ascension Day. The Son of God was restored to His former glory. Well, not even his former glory, but to *more* than that. He now also added the glory of full obedience to God while having been on earth.

But Jesus goes *even one more step further down*. His splendor was not only based on his divine essence, on being the ruler of heaven and earth. It was, as we saw, also related to his lowly service – even his death on the cross.

But He derived his glory also from a third element: from the people who followed Him. And this is surprising.

"I have revealed you [he prayed to His Father,] to those whom you gave me out of the world [that is, his disciples... and Jesus continued...] and glory has come to me through them."

Jesus received splendor from his disciples... that motley crew? The people He had just been eating with, and who would all abandon Him in the hours ahead, when Jesus was crucified ... were adding to the glory of Jesus? Could He not have chosen better people?

Maybe. But for all their faults, they *believed* in Him. They had faith in Him. Our faith in Jesus Christ glorifies Him. It glorifies Him if we believe the words He speaks as words from God and if we obey them.

3 Sharing in God's eternal glory in Christ

To those who believe in Him, Jesus grants amazing privileges. First and foremost, He gives them real life. To know Him is to *live*.

"This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and Him whom you sent, Jesus Christ."

This statement forces us to a new understanding of the word *eternal*. The dictionary defines eternal as "without beginning or end; existing through all time; everlasting," so we think of eternal life as life without end.

Jesus, however, defines *eternal life* as *knowing God and Jesus Christ*. This process begins during our earthly life and continues into eternity. It is, therefore, a kind of life without end, but its essential character has more to do with its quality – a relationship with God – than with its quantity, its endlessness.

We touch here upon a deep mystery of the Christian faith. We share in the quality of life that is essentially only part of God: his *glorious eternity*.

We have read from the first letter of St Peter – in this letter he says:

"You are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. [And] the God of all grace, [...] has called you to his *eternal glory* in Christ."

The return of Jesus Christ to his Father is a great feast for us. Because as He is back and now sits at the right hand of the Father, restored to His former majesty and beyond, we who are connected with Him, also share *in His eternal glory*.

Connected with Him, we participate in that great feast of love, peace and joy in heaven. Our faith *glorifies Him*, and He makes us participate in the splendor of communion with God: *He also glorifies us*.

The one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is united in love, peace and joy. This is the essence of His eternal glory. And we are being lifted up, spiritually, by Jesus and we ascend with Him to participate in this eternal and glorious feast of love.

It is not strange that, in this context, Jesus prays for the disciples whom He is about to leave behind on earth, that they will be one, just as He and the Father are one. Nothing honors and glorifies God more than when his sons and daughters serve each other in unity.

We reflect his splendor best, when we serve one another; when we are prepared, like our God, to do all for the sake of others and not for ourselves. In such an environment, there is the love, peace and joy that exists eternally in God, and that He, from the first day of our Creation, intended for each of us.

Conclusion

I warned you; the intimacy of Jesus with his Father in this prayer leads to a wealth of knowledge about who God is.

Knowing Him through faith in Jesus is eternal life. It makes us participants in the glorious love-relationship in God.

Nothing honors God more than when we draw near to Him and to one another; when we enjoy the community that He offers to us. He is *our* Father through Jesus Christ, and we are brothers and sisters.

And when we celebrate Holy Communion, we eat and drink with Him, as participants in the divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What an amazing honor for us, to kneel before Him and to then together enjoy His presence.

Amen.