

Jesus prays when he's in a jam

In a jam, we pray. No matter how strongly parents, catechists, and clergy tell us to pray regularly, not just to ask for things but to praise God, to keep an attitude of thankfulness at all times -- we most spontaneously, happily and faithfully pray when we're in a jam.

Jesus is more human than you might realize. His longest prayer recorded in the Bible comes on the night before he died -- in his biggest jam. Next Sunday's gospel is one excerpt.

John has painted an image of Jesus as God's messenger. Those who see Jesus see the Father. At the end of the Last Supper, Jesus turns in a report, so to speak, of his mission. He tells the Father what he's done, and how to finish what's left.

We hear this passage during the Easter season because it reflects on life. Here Jesus describes the great Easter theme of new life, its nature and its perils. The life Jesus offers will be marked by unity. It will be enriched with truth. It will be distinguished from the world's false hopes that threaten.

This message becomes intense for Jesus because he's turning over the mission to the disciples. Not just his mission -- his identity. Those who see Jesus see the Father; now those who see the disciples will see Jesus. As the Father sent Jesus, so he sends followers. He loves them as he loves himself, for they are now the body of Christ, the image of God for the world.

The problem is, the world hates them. They are in the world, but not of it. And the principles of life that the world embraces run counter to the unity and truth which give the life of Christ. The very world they are asked to serve will reject them. It's a fate known well by tax auditors and telemarketers, a club few people yearn to join.

The hate-filled world is still with us. You can see it in individuals who have lost hope and resort to criticism, or in those who scuffle with suicide, rape and murder. You can hear it on radio talk shows and watch it on network TV. Many people prefer to complain about problems rather than work with understanding toward their solutions. The disease permeates Congress, families, parishes, presbyterates, and dioceses. Lunch breaks at work find people harping on what's wrong with the company. We're all part of it -- we feed ourselves a diet of venom, criticism, and disunity.

Jesus' greatest prayer was that disunity not hurt the work of his Church. His fear was well-founded. For 2,000 years we have fought and bickered over everything from adjectives to furniture.

No one would want the job of carrying out Jesus' work after his death, yet Jesus does not ask the Father to make the work go away. He asks the Father to help the Church do it.

Jesus knew well the hostility of the world. He wanted his followers to contrast that hostility with unity. Jesus feared the sickness of disunity, but he promised the remedy of truth. The coming of the Holy Spirit would help the disciples to know the truth, to rejoice in it, and to find God in their unity.

For Jesus, the model of unity was his relationship with the Father. He prayed for that kind of unity in the Church. He knew that unity, not disunity, would bring joy. The world that wallows in complaint would never be happy. So much did Jesus crave this unity for us, so much did he love us, that he accepted death to reveal for us the secret of joy. In dying, he celebrated his unity with the Father, and modeled the oneness that love can bring.

This last Sunday before Pentecost shows us how desperately the world needs the coming of the Holy Spirit. In his final prayer, his final report to the Father, Jesus has given a job description of what the Holy Spirit should do: reveal truth, build unity, protect from discord and give life. The world, sick with discontent, agonizingly awaits its joy. In the Gospel, in the gift of the Spirit, that joy will be revealed.

If we reflected on the jam the world is in, perhaps we'd pray more regularly. This would answer Jesus' prayer. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to pray, so in our very act of prayer the Spirit accomplishes its mission -- bringing life to a world racked with anger.

As followers of Christ, we become his messengers, the ones who complete his mission for the world today. Where we see disunity, Christ calls us to be agents of union, providing not another avenue for complaint, but highways of understanding, giving direction for life.