



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, May 27, 2001
The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint John 17:20-26
+

MORE GUIDANCE FROM DANTE

Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Gospel for today is part of what is called Jesus' high priestly prayer. Jesus was in perfect communion with the Father at all times. When he prayed, it was as much for the encouragement of his disciples and those around him as it was for himself. Christ's prayers in the Gospels are always significant, but his high priestly prayer particularly stands out.

You and I were included in Jesus' great prayer: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word."

Jesus was praying on his last night with his disciples, the time of the Last Supper, the night he was betrayed and handed over to his enemies and to his death on the cross. Think of the impact of the intentional last words of a dying person to those he knows and loves (but even more!). Jesus, in just this situation, desires his Father's grace for "those whom thou hast given me." The Lord was not just the Victim of the events befalling him; he presided over them as a Priest, which is why this prayer is so important.

In today's portion of the prayer, Jesus asks for two things on our behalf. 1) The first is that his Church may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one, "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." 2) The second is that we may be with him, not only here on earth, but with him in heaven on the other side of death. It is this second desire of our Lord, *that where he is, there we might also be to reign with him in glory*, that I want to dwell on in this sermon.

This is the Sunday after Ascension Day. Forty days after he rose from the dead, after a period in which Jesus impressed upon his followers the full reality of his Resurrection, Jesus was "taken up into heaven." The time of his Resurrection appearances was then succeeded by the descent of the Holy Spirit, which inaugurated the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the Sacraments, and the life of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. This era, which includes us, will last until Christ's glorious return to judge the world.

Where is Jesus, now that he has ascended to the right hand of the Father? As I did in last week's sermon, so now I want to borrow some insights from Dante Alighieri, this time from his *Paradiso*. [By the way, you are cordially invited to join us for the concluding session this Tuesday evening of our three-part course on Dante's immortal pilgrimage through the afterlife, his *Divine Comedy*.]

In his ecstatic experience of entering the Presence of God and seeing Christ in the rapturous glory of the Trinity, "the Love that moves the sun and other stars," Dante conveys two mysteries about Jesus' Ascension and his "location" in glory. The first is his sensation of rising, flying, soaring. The second is his discovery that the rising is also a kind of entry into the depth, the heart, the center of everything.

Let us speak first of rising to a central height. Led by the spirit of his ideal of human beauty, graciousness and love, his Beatrice, the poet encounters saint after saint as he ascends through each circle of the heavens. Each speaks of a different kind of glory: the rule of justice in kingdoms, the service of the poor, the purity of love and genuine chastity, the truth about the deepest mysteries of life, the beauty of holiness in art, music, and all virtuous accomplishments, the battle against evil. Finally, in a climactic procession of mediation, Beatrice commends Dante to the mystic Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who asks the glorious Virgin Mother of God to give Dante the vision of her Son in the very heart of God. The climax is breathtaking enough to read; God alone knows what it was like for Dante to experience.

But as this sensation of rising, flying, soaring upward progresses, the poet reveals he has been going *in*, into the deep heart of God. The miles and eons he has traversed are *spiritual*. He has been *drawn in* every bit as much as he has been drawn upward.

The Medieval theologians of Dante's time were like us in their appreciation of God as the Divine Center of everything. They were fond of a saying that God may be compared to a sphere or circle, whose center is everywhere but whose circumference is nowhere! God is the "Central Orb" who contains everything. And that Central Orb is precisely the *place*, "the right hand of the Majesty on High," to which Jesus Christ our Lord has ascended, taking our humanity into the Heart and Center of all things.

We can point to the location of Christ in his Ascension by learning from this Church's reredos and from our participation in this Eucharist. When you climb the Fifth Avenue steps and enter, you are drawn further upward. The three blue windows piercing the reredos suggest the Sapphire Throne of the Trinity. I remember the first time I saw it. I thought, "My God!" and felt driven to my knees to worship and pray.

But who are depicted around the reredos with Christ at the center? The people of God! Saints ancient and modern, including disciples like us (and Brother Dante.) What is going on at the bottom? Why, the Lord's own banquet, where his pilgrim people, still making their way on earth and "seeking homes eternal," come to receive his body and blood, which is communicated from the very Heart of God by the High Priest Himself.

How do we consume this holy food and drink? Yes, by eating and drinking, but more essentially, by feeding on Christ in our hearts with desire and gratitude. So where is our ascended Lord after all? He is *at the center, at the heart*, of everything. He is both high on his Sapphire Throne and also deep within us, *in here (!)*, the Lifeblood and Breath of our very lives.

If we feel as though we are somehow off on the circumference of everything or even out beyond it, we need to know that Jesus is there. God's sphere has no circumference; he is at the heart of everything. Jesus ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things. All we need to

do, like the Prodigal Son who came to his senses or like Dante in his mid-life despair, is arise, and *start to go home*. As we get closer and closer, we will find that what we have been seeking has been with us all along, deep within; we simply had to take a long journey to rediscover it.

Our High Priest has prayed: “Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am.” O that we were there! But when we do get there, we will know, as Dante discovered, that “...everything the will has ever sought / Is gathered there, and there is every quest / Made perfect...” (*Paradiso*, xxxiii, 97)

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.