

THE MASTER PRAYS!

Today's Text: Jn 17: 1- 26

Extracts:

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, *the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him... I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world...I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours... Sanctify them by Your truth; Your word is truth... I do not pray for these alone; but also for those who will believe in Me through their word” [Jn 17: 1-2, 6, 9, 17, 20]*

In late September 2011, Joe Frazier, aged 67, was diagnosed with liver cancer and admitted to hospice care (that is, medical care for patients with terminal illnesses, likely to die in six months or less).¹ Frazier is best remembered as the first man to beat Muhammad Ali (March 1971). They went on to have two more memorable battles, the last being the “Thrilla in Manila.” Ali always taunted Frazier, calling him a gorilla and an Uncle Tom (a derogatory term to describe a black person that humiliatingly defers to white people). Therefore, for a very long time, Joe Frazier harboured deep-seated bitterness against Ali. In early November 2011, Muhammad Ali, 69, heard that Joe Frazier’s condition had deteriorated. He expressed his concern in the following words, “The news about Joe is hard to believe and even harder to accept. Joe is a fighter and a champion and I am praying he is fighting now.” In the early hours of Monday, 7 November 2011, Joe died and Ali was at his funeral on 14 November 2011.

Why did Ali pray for Frazier? It could be a defining moment for Ali himself. For a long time, he has suffered from Parkinson’s disease, a neurological condition that has slowed his movements and speech. The boxing master who calls himself the greatest knows that sooner than later, it could be his own turn to be called home. Two thousand years ago, the Master of all, Jesus the Christ, was about to face death on Calvary and He prayed! Do you know who or what He prayed for? Let us find out from this week’s study.

¹ Story based on the following sources: “Ali: I’m praying for Joe Frazier,” <http://msn.foxsports.com/boxing/story/muhammad-ali-praying-for-joe-frazier-110611> , Nov. 7, 2011; and “Boxing legend, Joe Frazier, dies after battle with liver cancer,” <http://msn.foxsports.com/boxing/story/boxing-legend-joe-frazier-dies-after-battle-with-liver-cancer-110711> ,Nov. 8, 2011.

1. Background: Jesus says His last prayer before His Passion

The moment that you have been waiting for all these years has finally arrived. It is *a threshold moment*, the point at which something begins or changes. You cannot undo the past but you must move on to the future. Today is the last day of your past as well as the first day of your future. In this week's Bible text, we find Jesus in that situation. The purpose for which He came in flesh was about to begin- His Passion, when He would suffer and be crucified on the cross. In the last three years before that day, He had been preparing His disciples for their worldwide crusade to spread the gospel of salvation to all of humanity. Now, He was about to leave them but were they ready? Meanwhile, the Jewish and Roman leaders were already on the way to arrest and try Him. He had fears. He had expectations. It was the time to pray.

Praying was never a problem for Jesus. He often withdrew into the wilderness to pray [Lk 5: 16]. Before choosing the twelve apostles, He spent the whole night alone in the mountain "in prayer to God" [Lk 6: 12-13]. In fact, His disciples were so impressed with His praying habits that they one day said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." He taught them the Lord's Prayer (the Our Father) [Lk 11: 1-4], which is today the most popular prayer in our churches. The prayer we are about to study is different from His earlier such prayers in many respects. For example, He was about to die on the cross. For that to happen, He had to give up His divinity for a season. In His own words, "No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down, and I have power to take it again" [Jn 10: 18]. Therefore, we can relate to it because our Master has given us a model of how to deal with a threshold moment that we may face in the family, office, business or ministry.

In studying this prayer, we should pay attention to the following aspects:

a) *Jesus prays for Himself*

As He lifted up His eyes to heaven, Jesus said, "Father, *the hour has come*. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You" [Jn 17: 1]. To glorify is to exalt or elevate. Soon after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, certain Greeks who were among those that came to worship at the feast in Jerusalem desired to see Jesus. They came to Philip who told Andrew and both of them went to tell Jesus. He replied them, "The hour has come *that the Son of Man should be glorified*." He knew that His death was near and it was for that purpose that He came to that hour. So, He said, "Father, glorify Your name." A voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again" [Jn 12: 20-28].

Jesus' prayer in this week's study text was, "I have glorified You on the earth. *I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself*, with the glory which I

had with You before the world was” [Jn 17: 4-5]. Yes, it was time for those skeptics who saw Him merely as a great teacher to know that this is the Messiah, the Lamb of God, sent by His Father to take away the sin of the world [Jn 1: 29]. His Father answered this prayer in Christ’s resurrection and ascension into heaven. For taking human form and dying on the cross in obedience to His Father’s will, God has also “highly exalted Him, and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” [Phil. 2: 5-11].

b) *Jesus prays for His disciples*

Next, Jesus prayed for His disciples that had been with Him in His last three years on earth. The majority of them were poor fishermen taken out of their familiar territory around the Sea of Galilee. They had come to live with and trust Jesus. They had come to believe most, if not all (at the time) of the things that He had taught them. He was about to leave them. Jesus knew that they were going to scatter soon after His arrest. In fact, one of them, Judas Iscariot, had already taken a fee to betray Him. Peter, their “bold” leader was about to deny thrice that he knew Jesus. Therefore, Jesus knew exactly the kind of petition that He should place before His Father concerning them.

Jesus began by reminding His Father who His disciples were: ordinary men that

- His Father gave Him out of the world who had kept His word [Jn 17: 6]
- Had come to know that everything that Jesus had taught them came from His Father [v. 7]
- Had come to believe and accept that Jesus came from God[v. 8]
- Were now Christ’s in whom He was glorified [v. 10]

Of those in the world, Jesus prayed for His disciples, telling His Father, “*I pray for them. I do not pray for the world, but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours*” [v. 9]. Jesus prayed for their *unity* or oneness [v. 11], *protection* “that none of them is lost except the son of perdition [Judas Iscariot], that the Scripture might be fulfilled [v. 12], the *joy of the Lord* [v. 13], and *sanctification by the word of God* which is truth [vv. 15-17]. So *equipped* and sanctified, His disciples would be able *to do the work for which He had prepared them* [v. 18].

The Master knew what His disciples actually needed in order to carry out the mission that He had left for them. That was all that He prayed His Father to provide. Have you noted that?

c) *Jesus prays for all believers*

Jesus added, “***I do not pray for those [His disciples] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word***” [v. 20]. He thus prayed for all believers! You may recall what He told Thomas who had doubted His resurrection. After showing Thomas signs of the crucified Jesus on the risen Christ, he said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus replied him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” [Jn 20: 24-29]. We did not see but we have believed. He foreknew that and that was why He also prayed for us.

Jesus prayed that believers should be one in Him and His Father so that the world would believe that His Father sent Him. ***He prayed for believers to be made perfect in love.*** He desired that they be wherever He was so that they would be able to behold the glory that His Father had given Him, for He had loved Him before the foundation of the world [Jn 17: 21-24]. Again, His prayer centred on ***oneness, unity and love.*** Rounding up His prayers, Jesus said, “O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these [disciples and believers] have known that You sent Me. And ***I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them***” [vv. 25-26]. Amen!

What rings through is deep love and mutual respect between Father and Son. If through our faith in Jesus we have become sons of God, why is it that we cannot pray to our Father with such confidence and assurance? What lessons can we learn from that story to upgrade our prayer life?

2. Lessons for the true believer’s prayer life

The following lessons strike me, among others:

a) *Nobody is too big to pray!*

Jesus taught believers to pray to His Father through His Son [Jn 14: 14]. So, if the One through whom we should reach God also prays, why do some of us feel too big to pray? Why do some church leaders pay so much attention to crusades and revivals and find little or no time to pray?

Many of us do not pray until we are in need. We go to church or revival services when we are passing through trying times. The rich, the healthy

and the privileged may be under the mistaken impression that they do not need to pray. That is why church-going has dropped dramatically in most developed countries at a time that there is no sitting room in churches in poor or depressed economies.

Praying is the only means of communication with God. When you are geographically apart from your loved ones, can you afford communication silence for a day or two without getting worried? That is why the word of God says we should pray without ceasing which is (among other things) the will of God in Christ Jesus for us [**1 Thess. 5: 17-18**]. In communicating with your loved ones, you cover a variety of issues, such as information exchange and update, requests or appreciation, praise and encouragement, etc. The word of God enjoins us to make our requests known to God with prayer, supplication and thanksgiving [**Phil. 4: 6**].

Some believers are always running after their pastors or priests to pray for them as if they alone have the formula to reach God. Praying is for all, including children for “out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants, God has ordained strength” [**Ps. 8: 2**]. For example, when Jonah preached repentance to the people of Nineveh, they believed God and proclaimed a fast “from the greatest to the least of them” [**Jon. 3: 5**]. Therefore, you must be ready to pray for yourself (and others) because ***God has no grandchildren!*** We are all His sons and daughters- that is, those who believe in His Son, Jesus. The rest are His creatures.

b) *Everyone should pray to the Father*

Another important lesson from this study is that we should pray to God the Father and no one else. ***God is Almighty and yet each member of the triune God operates on the basis of authority, not power*** [**Matt. 28: 18**]. Let me use the analogy of a book to help your understanding. A book has three dimensions-length, breadth and height. Each plays its assigned role. The height determines the size of the book while the length determines the size of each page. The width determines the number of words per page. In like manner, with respect to the triune God, Jesus will judge the world and yet only the Father knows the day and the hour of Christ’s return [**Matt. 24: 36**]. Without the Holy Spirit, no one can call Jesus Lord [**1 Cor. 12: 3**] and yet His work is to glorify Jesus, not Himself [**Jn 16: 13-14**]. Christ’s role is to reveal His invisible Father to the world [**Jn 14: 9**]. Therefore, as Jesus Himself has taught us, “Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you” [**Jn 16: 23**]. It has to do with authority or role, not power.

Some people pray to angels and dead saints but when John fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed him some revelations in the island of Patmos, the angel said to him, “See that you do not do that! I

am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" [Rev. 19: 10]. Therefore, ***you can honour dead saints, worship Jesus but pray only to God the Father.***

c) *What you pray for measures who you are!*

Jesus' prayer was focussed. He concentrated on His earthly mission- His Passion, His disciples and His believers. That suggests that what you pray for is a measure of who you are. Writing to Timothy, Paul said, "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence, for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" [1 Tim. 2: 1-3]. Paul was Christ's apostle to the Gentiles. When God asked Solomon what he wanted, he prayed for wisdom, knowledge and understanding so that he could rule his kingdom well [1 Kgs 3: 5-9]. Solomon wanted to be an effective administrator.

Examine your prayers. The likelihood is that they are dominated by requests for self and family, for God to make you the head and not the tail, to lift your head above your enemies, etc! Yet, Jesus enjoins you to "pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven" [Matt. 5: 44-45]. What you pray for measures who you are.

In sum, Jesus is teaching us that your faith can make a difference if you hope to effectively deal with threshold situations for, as an African proverb puts it, you can still see even when your eyes have tears! ***You can only walk by faith if you know the God you communicate with in prayer*** [2 Cor. 5: 7; Heb. 11: 6].

3. Conclusion: Pray like the Master!

Today is the beginning of the rest of your life. Therefore, you are at the threshold of your transition to eternity right now. Who is sure to make it to tomorrow when s(he) goes to bed tonight? That is why how you pray tonight is significant. Pray like the Master Himself. Pray for others. Pray for the ministry or calling that God has given you. Pray for those who are working with you and helping you. Pray for other believers who are working to bring the kingdom of God to earth, that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Pray like the Master!