

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **Ascension Day**

**May 16, 2021**

#### **Psalm 1:1–6 (ESV):**

1 Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree

planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

4 The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

#### **First Reading: Acts 1:12–26 (ESV)**

##### **Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas**

Acts 1:12–26 (ESV): 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, 16 “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17 For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“ ‘May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;  
and  
“ ‘Let another take his office.’

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” 23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

**EPISTLE: 1 John 5:9–15 (ESV):**

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. 11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

**That You May Know**

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him,

that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

### **THE GOSPEL - John 17:11–19 (ESV):**

**11** And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. **12** While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. **13** But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. **14** I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. **15** I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. **16** They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. **17** Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. **18** As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. **19** And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

### **Sermon 20 – Ascension Day (Easter readings)**

#### **“Transforming Truth”**

#### **John 17:11b-19**

Dear friends,

Truth is hard to find, but more to the point truth is something that seems neutral. Objective. It doesn't lean one way or another, it is just what is, and that is what we like about it. We like that truth doesn't take sides, it doesn't have preferences. Jesus, though, in our Gospel lesson, talks about truth a little oddly for our tastes, and I want to explore why and what we can learn from this. Jesus talks about truth as if it has some kind of positive effect, and that's strange. Does truth actually do anything, or is it just there, and whatever happens afterward is kind of up to us?

This comes from the High Priestly Prayer, which I tried to do a series on this Lent. This is right after about where I stopped, which makes it useful. This is Jesus' penultimate action as teacher of the apostles, it is just about the last thing He does. He is in the Upper Room, the Lord's Supper has presumably been instituted and consumed, and this grand, many chapters of prayer happens. Is this a summary? Is it final encouragement? Is it just a prayer that we should pay special attention to? I think it's all of these things and more. Jesus' last words here not just summarize or encourage, but they put a point to everything He has been trying to teach throughout His time in this world.

Here's what He says: **“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”** Oneness is exceedingly important to Jesus and should also be important to us as His church. It is after all important enough for Jesus to mention it numerous times literally as He staring down the barrel of the crucifixion. You want your last words typically to be the most important bits, and oneness is something Jesus mentions often enough for us to take note of. He talks about oneness in the Father's name, and by His example, because the Holy Trinity is three yet one. Yet what is the Father's name, and what does Jesus mean for this for us practically? Like, okay we're supposed to be one. How?

That's a harder question to answer just on the basis of what He's said so far, but looking elsewhere in the Scriptures you can certainly find it. Paul says in Ephesians that we are to be one faith, one baptism, all drinking of one spirit. So there you go, we are supposed to be one in belief, united by our faith in Jesus Christ. Our oneness is not because we like each other. We're all too sinful for that, too frail, too mortal, too imperfect. Our oneness is because we all believe much the same things about the same Jesus. We are united by saying the same things about the same Jesus. We confess together, this is the Lord, this is His Word, this is His baptism and what it does, this is the Supper and what it is and what it does. That oneness is essential.

But there is a different oneness to us. It is not just belief, plenty of clubs, organizations, political parties, and other things like that share the same belief. They all believe the same thing, that's great, what separates us from them? Well, Jesus helps us with that too. **“14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”** Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth. I have given them your word. That is what separates the church from any other organization or club or tribe in society. A lot of people think that the church is just that, its another club, its another bunch, gathered around a common ideology. Jesus says we are far more than that. The church – you lot – is those that have been sanctified in the truth. The fact that we all believe the same thing is good, but its only good if what we believe is good. Faith doesn't do anything by itself. I can have deep faith in my ability to do maths, but that faith is misplaced, because I can't do maths. It is what you are believing *in* that matters, not how much you believe. So our oneness of belief isn't good by itself, it is good because we all believe in the truth.

It is perhaps the most bold-facedly offensive thing the church has to say, and we try really hard to say it nicely, but sometimes there's just no way around the facts. The facts are this: The church is right. Everyone who disagrees with our faith is wrong. I feel like an arrogant git just saying that, it sounds incomprehensibly narrow-minded, it sounds like someone who has completely lost their sense of self-awareness. But that is exactly what Jesus is saying. God's Word is true, and all men are liars. The end. Those that believe in the truth of God's Word – you lot – are believing in the truth. The truth. Not just one truth, or a belief that we choose, but the one truth. Two plus two equals four, no matter how hard I believe otherwise. What we say about Jesus is right, not because we're so smart, we're not, not because its us, but because it is what God's Word says about Jesus. Can we get it wrong? Yeah, we really can, but that doesn't change the fact that God's

Word is true. God's Word is more true than our ability to misunderstand it or screw it up. God makes Himself clear, even if we mumble or say the wrong thing at the wrong time. When is the church right, and when are we talking out of our sinful, stupid little mouths? Check God's Word, and you will find the difference.

Going back to the effect of truth, Jesus says quite clearly here that the truth God gives us is transforming. It is restorative, rejuvenating. It sanctifies us. Again, we think of truth as just there. It doesn't do anything good, it doesn't do anything bad, it just is. Jesus tells us that God's truth is far more than just reality. It isn't just what is, it is good for us. It is healthy for us. Why is this? Well, because of what God's truth actually says. It says that we are of the world, but also of God. We are sinners, rotten to the core, but we are also saints, redeemed by the blood of Christ. That rottenness has been turned to healthy life by Jesus' perfect action, and it is this truth that transforms us. When God says "I forgive you all your sins" He is not just saying something true, He is not just reporting the facts (ma'am), He is telling us what is happening to us. He is making it happen inside of us. When God says your sins are forgiven, this becomes your reality, it becomes what you are, forgiven, holy, sanctified as Jesus says. When God calls you His child, you are His child, that is new for you every day. God's truth is not just honest reporting, God's truth is a new creation of who you are and what your whole life is for. Jesus is our Savior, God is our Father, the Holy Spirit is our helper, that is what is true, and we are sinners redeemed by Christ the crucified. That is the truth that God does to you. He doesn't just tell it to you, He does it to you.

**"12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves."** To be kept in God's name is to be kept in God's truth. To be kept in God's truth is to be a son of God, part of His family, loved by Him, cared for by Him. All of this is yours, and that is what

Jesus is saying. He's not just talking about the disciples, He's talking about you. He is with you, and He keeps you in God's name, God's truth. Why? So that your joy might be fulfilled when you leave this world and go to the next. We seek joy in this world. I know. It's hard to live on promises. It's hard to live always looking forward, always looking to what might come next, I have done it for so long. But our joy is future tense, it is coming, and it will come for all of us in due time when our death comes or when Jesus comes back, whichever comes first. That is a truer, purer definition of joy than the world could ever dream of. All your good times on this earth can't begin to compare to the sinless bliss of the New World that Jesus builds for us right now. Our joy comes, and we rejoice at its coming, even as our flesh screams at it to hurry up and get here. Amen, Come Lord Jesus.

We too speak in the world, like our Savior did. We speak the very things He spoke to us. We speak of the fact that we are sinners, that they are sinners like us, we're all in this together, messy, human, imperfect, truly awful if we're honest. We speak of the fact that we are redeemed despite this, redeemed from this, that Jesus has suffered our punishment, made God like us again, that we have a purpose, to make our neighbor's life a little brighter, to show that same mercy that God showed to us. We say lots of other things, but those are at the center. Jesus has gone to the Father, but He has not left us. He is with us in the truth itself, so that when we speak the truth, it is not our words that have to be just right. We don't have to say all the right things in all the right ways to just the right person. It is Jesus that goes out in our words, and He is the one that makes it all true. He is the one that makes it all right. **“18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”** He sends you. He doesn't ask you to go out on some kind of crusade. He doesn't ask you to guess what's true or what's false, what's God's will and what isn't. He tells you. I'm sending you. You carry the truth with you. I'm sending you into your own life, into your family, with your friends, at your work, with your kids. I'm sending you there, the places you already go, and I'm going with you. I'm going with you

in your heart and on your lips. I'm going with you and I'm going to make all the good happen that I intend.

It isn't our good. It isn't our truth. It all belongs to God. Let Him defend it. Let Him speak it. Let Him do it to you, take it, eat it, repeat it. It is all we have. That's great, because it's all you need. You are sanctified in His truth, you have His name, you received both when you were baptized. You don't have to go anywhere with it. You just have to live with it. You don't have to say the right things about it. Jesus has already said them, to you.

Amen.