

# Lenten Luncheon Reflections 2009

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

Praying in the Name of Jesus our Friend and Priest

Who Comes in the Name of the Lord

## LITANY ON THE NAMES OF JESUS

*Based on the meditation, "Jesus' Names" by Jennifer Collins, from her book, "Finding Faith with Jesus Christ," and are used by permission from the author.*

Leader: Jesus Christ, born in a manger,

Unison: **for us facing every danger.**

Leader: Jesus is your elder brother,

Unison: **He will love us like no other.**

Leader: Jesus has the answer to our every prayer,

Unison: **He will keep us in His tender care.**

Leader: Jesus will all our burdens bare,

Unison: **come to Him, our problems share.**

Leader: Jesus was crucified for us,

Unison: **He will give us life anew.**

Leader: Jesus died for you and me,

Unison: **come, let worship Him on bended knee.**

Leader: Jesus is our life, our way, our end,

Unison: **our faithful, never changing Friend.**

Leader: Jesus is our Guardian true,

Unison: **He will take good care of us.**

Leader: Jesus the King wants to reign in our hearts,

Unison: **but first we must make our old self depart.**

Leader: Jesus, our Rock and hiding place  
**Unison: will give us all sufficient grace.**

Leader: The names and qualities of Jesus are too numerous to mention.  
**Unison: let us give them all of our attention.**

Leader: Loving and Holy Jesus, thank you for all you have done for us,  
**Unison: and for all that you mean to us. Amen.**

During Lent this year as our offertory response we have sung one of the stanzas of the hymn of John Newton, “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.” This stanza says,  
Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my Prophet, Priest and King, My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, Accept the praise I bring.

As we think about some of those various ways of addressing Jesus I would like us as we think today about “Praying in the Name of Jesus,” who comes in the Name of the Lord, to think especially about the titles of “Friend” and of “Priest.” Both of these titles give us assurance as we offer our prayers in the name of Jesus.

There is probably no hymn that speaks more clearly to us of the assurance that we have to pray in the name of Jesus because Jesus is our friend than that of Joseph Scrivens, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Today I would like to invite us to sing stanzas 1 and 3 of this hymn.

As we speak of Jesus our Friend we remember the way in which friendship is a reciprocal thing. It is hard to say that we are someone’s friend if that person also does not claim us as a friend. True friendship cannot be a one-sided thing. It is only those who see themselves as being friends of Jesus who can really know what it is to say and to sing, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” It is interesting then to remember that according to John just prior to his death it is this type of close relationship that Jesus tells his disciples he would like to have with them, and, therefore, by implication with all people who claim a relationship with him. I would invite you to look at these words with me as they are found on the sheet:

(John 15:12-17)

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

In these words, of course, Jesus is preparing them for what he himself is about to do for them and for all who will claim his friendship as he suffers and dies on the cross in love for the world.

[14] You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Clearly for Jesus friendship cannot be a one sided thing. We can only claim to be his friends if we seek to emulate what he in love has done for us.

[15] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Once again as we saw last week Jesus is not claiming to speak on his own authority. His words and his actions can only be understood as we affirm that he is the Son of God. Being called a servant of God in the Old Testament was regarded as a position of honor. But Jesus is saying however honorable such a position might be I want you to know an even more honorable and intimate relationship with me as “friends.”

[16] You did not choose me but I chose you.

For those disciples his words may well have brought back to their minds their first encounter with Jesus as he called them and invited them to follow him. We may say and sing, “I have decided to follow Jesus,” but our decision is always a response to his invitation to follow him. This is an invitation that may not have come as directly to us as it did to those first disciples but we remember what John said in one of his letters, “We love because God first loved us.” All our loving does not make God love us. God is always the one who takes initiative and comes to us in love even though we may not be worthy of it.

Jesus then makes clear why he called people to follow him. It is not simply that they might know a relationship with him but as he has just spoken of himself as the true vine and of ourselves as the branches we see that the purpose of our friendship is that we might bear the fruit of love in our own lives. As he had said earlier, of course, it is by our love for one another that people will come to see that we are his disciples.

So Jesus says,

And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

What is the fruit that will last? Surely it is the fruit of love? Or as Paul called them the fruit of the Spirit. Like Jesus the love we offer to other people may not be accepted, and may even be downright rejected but still it is by our love as Christians that we are witnessing to this world of the love that will never fail them or let them down, the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The passage about what it means to be friends of Jesus concludes by saying,

“so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. [17] I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Whenever we pray and say, “we ask these things in the name of Jesus, or, “we ask these things for the sake of Jesus,” or “we ask these things in Jesus’ name,” we are praying as he suggests. But what does it mean that God will give us everything if we ask in the name of Jesus? The first thing that it prompts us to think and to ask is, “Is my request worthy of Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his very life for those he loved” “Is it something for which he would ask?” When we pray in the name of Jesus then we cannot pray that personal ambition or desire might be realized if that means that someone else must be hurt or abused or wounded in the process.

The second thing that praying in the name of Jesus means is that we are ready to follow his example of prayer. On Thursday night we will remember again his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prays expressing his own desire that the cup of suffering might be allowed to pass from him but concludes the prayer by saying, “yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:41) William Barclay has said that as for Jesus so for us, “real prayer must be, not that God would send us the things for which we wish, but that God would enable us to be able to accept the things that are according to his will.” (The Gospel of John, Volume 2 by William Barclay *St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1955* p. 210)

The third thing that praying in the name of Jesus says to us is that we pray in his name because he is praying for us. Paul writing to the Christians in Rome says, as you will see on the sheet,

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (Romans 8:34)

We pray in the name of Jesus because Jesus himself stands between us and God and intercedes for us or as we sometimes say, “Jesus prays for us.” Our prayers of intercession are our prayers for other people. Paul says this is now what the Risen Jesus does, he is not praying for himself but for other people, including each one of us. In this way, of course, Jesus takes the role of priest of bringing our prayers and our concerns to God. As Presbyterians and as Protestants we pray in the name of Jesus because we do not believe we need to have a priest to pray for us, or to hear our confession, but rather that we can pray and present our own confession of sin directly to God through Jesus Christ. This is what we mean when we talk about the priesthood of all believers. We can all pray to God through Jesus without the need for some special priest to hear the content of our prayers and confessions. It also means that all of us also have the privilege to pray to God on behalf of other people and that this privilege of prayer is not confined and restricted to a few specially trained or equipped people.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of a fourth aspect of praying in the name of Jesus and of claiming that Jesus is our priest, even our high priest. He says, as you will see on the sheet, (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. [15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. [16] Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The role of the priest, especially the high priest, was to represent the people before God and to represent God to the people. It was the priest who offered the sacrifices of the people to God and then proclaimed God’s word of forgiveness to the people. Jesus, of course, represents us before God in a far more unique way than any priest before him because he is the Son of God. He also is unique in the sacrifice that he offers. Unlike any priest who offered the sacrifice of sheep or goats, Jesus offered the sacrifice of himself, as the Lamb of God. The truly amazing thing is that in Jesus God offers the sacrifice of God’s own self on behalf of the sins of the world to show us how much he loves us. It is truly all that God in love has done for us in Jesus Christ that gives us confidence that as we come to him in our weakness and in our sin we will find mercy and grace to help in every time of need.

At the same time, of course, Jesus can also represent us as human beings before God because he has experienced all of the temptations and weaknesses of our human lives. In our hymn we have sung, “Do thy friends despise, forsake thee, take it to the Lord in prayer.” As we trace the events of this Holy Week we remember that there is no one who more than Jesus knows what it is to have friends despise and to forsake him. He can share with us in such experiences because he himself has known the joy and the pain of life upon this earth. As we pray in the name of Jesus so we have the assurance that the one who is praying with us and for us is the one who understands all of the situations of our lives and who still loves and is concerned about us in the midst of them all.

As I mentioned at our first Lenten luncheon there is no way in which in six weeks we could reflect on all of the over 700 names and titles given that scholars have associated with Jesus from the Bible. I hope though that our reflections together have helped all of us to grow in our appreciation of who Jesus is and of all that he means to us as we celebrate the gift of love that God has shown for us in him. Following Easter in our Worship Services we will continue to think about some of the names and titles of Jesus using what are termed the “I am Sayings,” found in John’s Gospel. These are ways in which Jesus spoke of himself as a way of helping us to grow in our relationship with him. I do not know what name or title for Jesus may be most significant to you. I hope, though, that whatever that name or title may be that it helps you to grow more and more to appreciate the great love which God has shown for each one of us and for the whole world in Jesus.

In his hymn, “Great God, Your Love Has Called Us Here,” Brian Wren helps us to reflect more on the way in which that love of God has been seen in Jesus. Brian Wren is one of the great contemporary British hymn writers. Until his retirement a few years ago he was on the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Next Sunday on Easter Day we will sing two of his Easter hymns. Today as we conclude we will sing this hymn which speaks to us of how the love of God has been seen in Jesus as both our friend and our high priest. His words prepare us for our celebrations on Thursday night, Good Friday and on Easter.

Since the last part of the fourth stanza of the hymn of Brian Wren is a really a prayer we will use this hymn as our closing prayer today. We will sing stanzas 1, 3 and 4 of “Great God Your Love Has Called Us Here”