

Prophet — Priest — King
First Reading: Colossians 1:15-20
Second Reading: John 17:6-19

I have never been particularly adept at memorization. In a former life when singing in public was a regular occurrence, it wasn't the crowd that spiked my dis-ease, nor was I all that nervous about hitting the notes. I had a good ear, and could sense if the ensemble was slipping out of tune, subtly employing the universal signal of tonal recovery (thumb pointed up, reminding my mates to imagine squeezing a quarter between their cheeks). No, the fuel of my anxiety was the fear that I'd forget the lyrics. Of course, the anxiety by itself made the fear self-fulfilling — *Just yesterday morning, they let me know you were gone. Suzanne, the plans... the plans...*

I could commit to memory, I just couldn't hold on to it. Thanks to our good friends, the Grahams, we adopted the Moravian blessing as our mealtime prayer. Took me three weeks to get it right — Come Lord Jesus, our guest to be, and bless these gifts bestowed by Thee; and...

Folks who travel will return and tell me about the church they visited, and sometimes they will say something like — “And the preacher never looked down at her notes...” And I want to say, “Well, bless her heart.”

So, I am not among those cradle Presbyterians who possess the lapel pin they earned by memorizing the Presbyterian children's catechism, that extended series of questions and answers used as a drill to help students articulate the basics of our faith tradition. Consequently, when my theology professor in seminary required us to memorize thirty questions from the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, I was as nervous as a spider in a shoe store. Yet, somehow I managed to memorize those questions, even in all the glory of their 17th Century King's English. I aced that test and managed to hold onto that precise wording for ... at least ... two, maybe three weeks.

Alas, the precise verbiage of the catechism has long faded from memory, but the concepts, themes, and thrust of the catechism continue to provide form and shape to my understanding of the Jesus Christ revealed in scripture. The Shorter Catechism adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith was written during the 1640s in the widening wake of the 15th Century Protestant Reformation throughout Europe and amidst the chaotic tensions roiling through royal, political, and religious life in the British Isles. The Church of Scotland adopted the Westminster Standards in 1647 and carried them with them to the Colonies in succeeding years.

The Confession and its catechisms do not rise to the authority of Scripture, but as with all the confessions included in our Book of Confessions, it is subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ and the Word of God as the Scriptures bear witness to Christ. Our Book of Order states that — *“The creeds and confessions of this church arose in response to particular circumstances within the history of God’s people. They claim the truth of the Gospel at those points where their authors perceived that truth to be at risk. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They appeal to the universal truth of the Gospel while expressing that truth within the social and cultural assumptions of their time.”*

At times, the Confessions state ideas that contradict each other, and as a product of a particular culture and time, there are elements conveying concepts not in keeping with our understanding of the Gospel today. However, they remain as important voices in our history and continue to provide a valuable tutor as we seek to comprehend the Jesus revealed in the Gospels.

I find this particularly true in relation to the ... circuitous ... prayer John puts before us today. *“Now they know that everything you have given me*

is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me ... I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” ... Huh? Is the room spinning or is it just me?

Now, apart from two verses near the end of chapter 16 and a couple of verses in chapter 14, Jesus has been speaking without interruption for three chapters by the end of today’s prayer. That’s a lot for those disciples to follow in one sitting, and it certainly has not become easier to grasp through the centuries. What’s going on here?

The setting for our text today is John’s version of the Last Supper. Jesus has humbly knelt to wash the disciples’ feet, and proceeded to offer an extensive discourse laying out a sort of thesis capturing the purpose and intent of his incarnation and his journey with them. The discourse and this prayer signal an important transition in the Jesus event. As soon as Jesus says *amen*, they are out in the night walking to the garden where Jesus is arrested. So, knowing this inevitability, in discourse and prayer Jesus is

shifting the responsibility for his mission to his disciples, and thus to the future church. Jesus wants his followers to be clear about his identity, God's purpose, and the relationships between God, Jesus, and the church.

Jesus here repeatedly returns to images and phrasing that convey his oneness with God, seeking to implant in the minds of the disciples and the church that in the presence of Jesus, we are experiencing nothing less than the very presence of God. *“The words I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”* In today's prayer, Jesus ties his identity to the identity of the disciples and the future church. *“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me ... All mine are yours, and yours are mine ... And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”*

Admittedly, all this yours, mine, and ours language can render one head spinningly dizzy. But thanks to Dr. Leith and that torturous little memorization exercise he assigned in Theology 2, I still possess the faintest

hints of theology gleaned from *The Shorter Catechism*, maybe just enough to get my feeble brain around what John's Jesus is telling us.

Question 23 asks — *What offices doth Christ execute as our Redeemer?*

And the student responds — *Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king...* Obviously, words like *doth* and syllables like *eth* were trending among the “in crowd” of the 17th Century.

Thankfully, those affectations along with the frilly shirts and powdered wigs faded from use long ago. Yet, Question 23's answer gets us closer to understanding who this Jesus we hear speaking in John is to us — Jesus is: Prophet, Priest, and King.

And wouldn't you know it, Question 24 asks — *How doth Christ execute the office of a prophet?* I'm so glad you asked. The catechism's answer? *Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.*

Revealing to us by his Word and Spirit. With another school year soon drawing to a close, we are grateful for the wise teachers who tutor our children as they walk through these chaotic and often distressing times. Do you remember that teacher who was so good, so invested in the subject and

in you as a student, so skilled at making the subject accessible to you, that even to this day you cannot think of the subject without thinking also of that teacher?

I've never met Mr. Holt, who taught history and government over at Ardrey Kell, but I know the impression he made upon both our boys, giving them a grasp of how to discern the rational in an irrational culture and world, lessons that continue to keep them engaged in current events and enable them to mine the reasonable and filter out the unreasonable.

Jesus said, "*I have made your name known...*" Jesus, our prophet, is that teacher who literally makes God real to us. You want to understand what is essential and what is inessential in this world? Look to Jesus. You want to know what peace, what love, what mercy, what compassion look like? Look to Jesus. Jesus prayed — "*Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them...*" We live in a confusing world. So, what does it mean to know that in Jesus, God becomes our ever-present teacher?

And yet, at the same time and without interruption, Jesus is also our priest. Question 25 of the Catechism asks — *How doth Christ execute the*

office of a priest? And the student responds — “Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.”

Reconciles us to God ... Makes continual intercession for us. Do you hear that? Jesus removes all barriers between God and your life. I love the way *A Declaration of Faith* puts it — *“Because [Jesus] shares our humanity and has bound us to himself in love, we have an advocate in the innermost life of God.”*

Through the years, one sentiment I have heard over and over in talking with people in the midst of, or recovering from, some daunting challenge or threat is this — “Matt, I’ve received all these notes, texts, and messages. I can’t express enough how much it means to me to know that people are praying for me. I can feel it.” Well, what does it mean to know that no matter your circumstances, Christ not only hears those prayers, but Christ is actually leading those prayers? In Christ, we have an advocate in the innermost life of God.

And as the advertiser intones — “And that’s not all!!” For following Question 25, we have Question 26 — *How doth Christ execute the office of a*

king? And the student responds — *Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.*

Now, the modern American mind hears this and protests, “Hey, we don’t live in a monarchy. We live in a democracy.” To which I say, good, you paid attention that day in civics. Perhaps you also learned all about prime ministers, premieres, dictators, juntas, Dumas, politburos and the like. Yet, rank them as you will, but they all represent finite and flawed earthly powers and principalities. We don’t even have travel abroad to know that when it comes to earthly powers and principalities, you are dealing with the best and worst of human striving, and no matter what system you pick, there is going to be dysfunction.

However, when we call Jesus, Lord, we are saying we have a higher authority, whose dominion eclipses any human authority, and whose sovereignty extends to all things, and whom we worship, serve, and praise. Yes, we are called to be good citizens in pursuit of the common good, but as our Confessions state — *“The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of all in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics,*

culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God's purpose rather than human schemes will finally prevail."

Prophet. Priest. King. Ever present, Jesus teaches us, Jesus prays for us, and Jesus' authority and purpose extend to every fiber of our being, every sphere of our lives. In Jesus, we have an advocate in the innermost life of God. Jesus said, "I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." We affirm Christ as our king and protector every time we recite the Lord's Prayer — *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil ... for Thine is the kingdom..."*

Tom Schellin was good enough to share with me the story of Walter Cizek, a Pennsylvania raised priest who felt a call to mission in Russia. There, he would go, but certainly not in the way he had planned. You see, this was 1929, and following the Bolshevik Revolution, access to Russia was severely limited. So, as an intermediate step Father Cizek was assigned to a ministry in Poland, where he was still serving in 1939 when war broke out.

Germany captured Warsaw, but Russia's Red Army overran eastern Poland, where Father Cizek was ministering. When it was discovered that he was a priest, the Russian authorities arrested him, charging him with the bogus allegation of being a Vatican spy. Father Cizek would be imprisoned for some 23 years, serving time in the notorious Lubyanka prison, and 15 years of hard labor in the prison camps of Siberia, doing outdoor construction in the extreme arctic cold.

It wasn't until 1963 that Father Cizek was allowed to return to the U.S. He said the question most often asked him following his return was: "How did you manage to survive?" Father Cizek's answer, "God's providence ... Through the long years of isolation and suffering," he said, "God had led me to an understanding of life and his love that only those who have experienced it can fathom." Having been stripped of a majority of the "external consolations, physical and religious," upon which humans rely, he said, God "had left me with a core of seemingly simple truths to guide me. And yet, what a profound difference they made in my life, what strength they gave me, what courage to go on!" (Walter Cizek, *He Ledeth Me*)

Prophet — Priest — King ... Teacher — Intercessor — Protector.

In Jesus we have an advocate in the innermost life of God. Who's praying for you? Jesus. Look, it says it right there in the text. You don't even have to memorize it. Just open up the Bible and read it — *“I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”* Thanks be to God. Amen.