

Jesus prays for us

Jesus' prayer is meant to be overheard.

By [Barbara Rossing](#)

May 9, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Rossing's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Each year the Gospel reading for the Seventh Sunday of Easter is taken from Jesus' great prayer in John 17, the conclusion of his farewell discourse. Jesus invites us into what Raymond Brown describes as a "heavenly family conversation" between himself and God.

This prayer, like Jesus' other prayers (John 11:41-42 and 12:27-28), is meant to be overheard by us. It witnesses to Jesus' return to God (his "glorification") and to his deep love for his followers. Everything he has he now gives to us, as he is returning back to God. While it has become fashionable to excerpt John 17:21 as an ecumenical program exhorting denominational unity, Jesus' words are more mystical than programmatic. In the logic of comparison (*kathos*, "just as," vv. 14, 16, 18, 21, 22, 23) so central to this entire prayer, Jesus proclaims in v. 23 that God will now love *us* with the very same love God had for Jesus.

God's glory bathes this prayer. We are permitted to "behold Jesus' glory"—recall the reference to the word become flesh whom we behold in John 1:14—a glory given to Jesus in love before the foundation of the world. This is a glory that Jesus now gives also to all of us (v. 22).

How powerful it is to know that Jesus has prayed to God on our behalf! There is no one for whom Jesus did not pray on his last night. Like the prayer of a parent overheard by the child for whom one intercedes, what this prayer reveals is Jesus'

deep love for the disciples. The great prayer of John 17 evokes longing in us to be fully “one” with Jesus, in the mystical communion of prayer, so that his prayer of love for us becomes not a farewell but rather a homecoming.

How do we learn to pray with such oneness in the heart of God? In *Diary of an Old Soul*, George MacDonald draws on imagery from the leaves of the tree of life from Revelation 22, today’s second lesson:

Sometimes, hard-trying, it seems I cannot pray for doubt and pain and anger and all strife. Yet some half-fledged prayer-bird from the nest may fall, flit, fly, perch—crouch in the bowery breast of the large, nation-healing tree of life. Moveless there sit through the burning day, and on my heart at night a fresh leaf cooling lay.

In this Easter season, when so many of us long to pray, perhaps these texts and Revelation’s tree of life can provide a canopy under which we can learn how to pray, in the spirit of Jesus who intercedes for us.