



Seventh Sunday after Easter

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 16 May 2021

READINGS

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5: 9-13; John 17: 6-19

Jesus prays for us

Chapter 17 of St John's Gospel is one of the most special glimpses into the life of Jesus. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus taught his followers, he showed them God's love through miracles and through his interactions with others – including Jews, Romans, Samaritans and others, and he was prepared to confront and stand up to those whose authority he saw as misplaced and causing unnecessary suffering to the least and the lowliest. It is truly a wonderful life-story and one which has fascinated everyone who has taken it remotely seriously. But here, we are allowed something unique. We are allowed an insight into the mind and heart of our Saviour as he prays to the Father before his final journey to death and resurrection and the end of his earthly ministry.

This chapter is in three parts. The first 6 verses Jesus prays for himself – that his completed and fulfilled life be glorified so that the Father who sent him is glorified too. The second part, which is today's reading, is for his disciples, and the third part is for those who will believe through the disciples – that means all who have been the church throughout the ages, ending with the present age and its Christians – at the moment, that's us.

So let us look in detail at verses 6-19. Jesus does one of the things that all people do when they reach the end of their lives. They look at what they did with their time on earth and gauge whether or not they fulfilled what they feel they were sent to do. Most of us have some regrets, and asking forgiveness is often part of that "goodbye" process. Jesus however has no such regrets. He can honestly tell God that those whom God gave to him, he can return them to his Father's care as fully developed and ready for ministry as they would ever be. Even Judas, and let's put aside the debate "was Judas predestined to betray Jesus, or did he choose to", there is nothing in Jesus' attitude which in any way resembles self-recrimination – "If only I had... Judas wouldn't have" and so on. Jesus had done what he came to do with all his disciples. There is nothing more he could have done.

Secondly, Jesus prays for their protection. He is leaving his message in the hands of these disciples who will in their teaching, like Jesus, face down authority, will challenge accepted mores, and will expose evil for what it is in those who want to keep it hidden. That is all dangerous, and persecution will be their lot. He prays for their protection as they carry the image of God in Jesus into a world which will in many respects be very hostile. Perhaps, too, he is praying for their protection from the evil one. They need to be saved from the demons within themselves, for temptation is the lot of everyone, especially those who are trying to do the work of God.

Ultimately, Jesus is praying that the disciples become “holy”. Not holy as in very, very good, although that is a side-effect of what he means, but that they will become united – united as a group of individuals who are dedicated to building a kingdom of holiness and righteousness and good judgement, and all in perfect union with the God, the Father to whom Jesus will be returning, and who has called them to this special ministry. If their ministry does what it is designed to do, we will all become one with the Father, and our differences will be manifestations of the wondrous creativity of a God who made us all exactly as we are. Just as multiple words put skillfully together make a story, and paint and brushstrokes and paper make a picture, or metal and rivets and wire and electricity together make a functioning machine, so people, black, white, old, young, male, female, gifted, mentally and physically challenged, and any other description, all will become one, holy, united body of Christ, and will give glory to the God who made us for Godself.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, if when we look at those amazing pictures of the universe, with galaxies and all the rest of it, we see ourselves as just as amazing? And when we spend time either in game reserves or watching TV and seeing the majesty and magnificence of the wildlife that, in spite of an unending battle against poachers, industrialists and developers is awe-inspiring, that we are also a fascinating manifestation of a wonderful, almighty creative God? Or do we look at those things from the outside – we don't see ourselves as part of this wonderful creation, but as separate - people suffocating in the plastic packaging that keeps us insulated, away from creation, and which effectively muffles the voice of God.

So let us re-look at today's Gospel and see it as Jesus praying for us who are now his disciples and the church they founded and of which we are now a part. We presume that Jesus works with us as he did with the first disciples. How has what Jesus has done with us and for us made us into the sort of disciples who are fully trained and developed? Are we totally, fully so inside the mind of Christ that we are functioning as disciples, or is there still work that he needs to do with us? What do we see as our growth areas? And how can we let Jesus work even more with us?

As disciples are we prepared to take on the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and build a kingdom with such dedication and purpose that we may well be in trouble from those whom we challenge? Do we know that Jesus prayed and prays for our protection? Do we go forward with courage knowing that, whatever faces us, Jesus is right there beside us?

Do we know that Jesus is right there because we are fully united with God in a holy church body that can take on the world? God longs for us to be at one with God, and in our most honest moment, we long for the closeness and presence of the God who created us and lives in the deepest place within us. What we spread when we tell the Gospel is that everyone and everything has the Maker's inspired imprint. Many abandoned, poor, lost people have no idea that they are so divinely created. Are we taking notice of them, caring for them, rescuing them, loving them? Is our battered world environment going to be saved from climate change by our love of what God has made?

The pandemic has pulled rug out from under the feet of the world. “Strong” nations have fallen over and are floundering, poorer nations are being trampled in the rush for a solution, vaccine and otherwise, and confusion reigns everywhere. Our country has fallen from being the icon of the world 27 years ago, to being a messy mix of inefficiency, corruption, self-seeking and incompetence, and the poor are no better off. Perhaps the facing up to our faults through the Zondo Commission is the beginning of the voice of God, but the question is, will we hear it to its conclusion, and will God ever be glorified again in our land?

Our church seems to have lost its strong voice and is in danger of collapsing in a self-pitying heap. While I don't doubt for one minute that individual Christians have been doing herculean work in helping the poor, the lonely and the over-worked in these times, and I am certain there are some wonderful parishes who are doing more than they can realistically do, but the only united voice the general, **unchurched** public have heard in our land from ALL the denominations is that of a victim along with other victims, and we are looking to others to save us, instead of ourselves being the arms of the Saviour. We say, "when can we go back to church, when can we sing, and have PROPER communion?" instead of "Who needs the help and how can we help them?" We have shown ourselves to be as lost and confused as the rest of the world, - and the danger is, we look for a Prince Charming who will make us live happily ever after, rather than a Christ who will fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit and send us out into a hurting world with a message of hope, and the actions which give that hope expression.

Jesus prays for us, and still pleads for us to the Father, that we may be one. Let us place our hand in his as he bids us get up once again, and walk. Our church and its rituals are beautiful, but none of it is meant to be **only** comforting. Far more to the point, it allows us into the deepest recesses of the mind of Christ, and we are motivated by wanting to have a whole world joining us there, and we put all our efforts and our prayers and our motivation into allowing our God into that. How does our participation in the Body of Christ make us stronger? How does it give us a sense of purpose and enable us to make those tough decisions, and walk the path Jesus calls us to? Let us as a church take our eyes away from our very real fears, and look again to that God who wants so much to be at one with us. And when we are in that unity, see where we are sent. Wherever that is, the Spirit of Jesus will meet us there, and God will indeed be glorified.