

## Sermon

### Sunday May 24th 2020 Easter 7 Evensong

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

*“I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.”*

As Christians, prayer is the cornerstone of our relationship with our Lord and the mainstay of our daily lives. During each act of communal worship, we pray together, using the proscribed words and formats found in our services, always including the words Jesus himself taught us, as the Lord’s Prayer. However, when we make our private prayers, we each do so in our own individual way and no-one else can know how we pray, what we say or the manner in which we express what is in our hearts. Where and how often we pray, how we position ourselves, kneeling, standing or sitting, what we use to aid our prayer, be it candles, music, icons, these are all matters of our own choice. We can use traditional words, we can let the words tumble from us, they may be those quick, darting “arrow” prayers; all are valid and a necessary way of communicating and developing our relationship with God. Sometimes, when words fail, or when we just want to be in God’s presence, silence is enough, in fact more than enough, as it allows God to speak to us. In whatever manner we say our prayers, it is fairly certain however, that a large part of what we say and ask is a pray for other people and especially for those we love.

All the gospels tell us that Jesus prayed often. We know that he took himself away to pray in quiet places, we know he suggested a pattern of prayer for his disciples when they

requested one. But we are seldom told what he actually said to God, what were his concerns and how he spoke to his father. However, in today's reading from St John's Gospel, we hear Jesus praying to his Father. We are given a rare insight into how he prayed and the words he used and how intimate was his union with the Father. These wonderful verses follow on from Jesus' long conversation with his disciples after they had shared supper together for the last time. Knowing that he was to leave them the following day, Jesus wants to reassure his friends that he will not abandon them.

So the beginning of his prayer is a combination of both celebration and plea. Jesus rejoices that he has achieved in words and actions all that has been asked of him, but asks God to allow him to complete his mission, terrible as it is to be, so that he may be allowed to return to his rightful place, exalted and glorified, at God's right hand in heaven. All this is not his only concern, however. Even faced by the horror of the next three days, Jesus prays for those he loves.

Jesus emphasises to his Father how appreciative he is of his disciples, how they have believed in him, listened to him, even though they have not always understood his teachings. They have been lent to him by God and have been instrumental and supportive in helping him to achieve his goal. Now he wants to be absolutely sure that they will be looked after. "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those you gave me."

It seems strange, understanding as we do that Jesus came to save the world, that this prayer is not inclusive; the disciples stand apart from the world. Indeed they did; they were the few who had not rejected Jesus, as the world at that time generally had. They had realised who he was and had become the

insiders who had given up everything to follow him. He therefore entrusts them to his Father as he prays “Holy Father, protect them in your name”.

What a powerful prayer; and how amazing that those words were meant not only for the first disciples of two thousand years ago, but for all those who have served as disciples since, us included. What a potent prayer for today, for the COVID-19 situation, when so many are in danger. What a prayer to offer on behalf of those we love now and at any time when they are in trouble or need protection. “Holy Father, protect them in your name!”

Jesus’ example in praying for those he loved is one we are asked by our Archbishops to follow in these days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, to be celebrated next Sunday. After Jesus’ ascension, the disciples spent their days together in an upper room in Jerusalem, praying for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the promised helper whose presence would strengthen and guide them in the task of spreading the gospel message. Metaphorically, because of a virus, we are also waiting in a locked room. We, too, are praying “Come Holy Spirit, come”, for we also are tasked with spreading the good news, but we are physically separated from those with whom we share our communal prayer. In these circumstances, our personal prayer becomes even more important, not just for asking guidance about our own way through the crisis, but for praying for others, asking that, even in the midst of the darkness that is COVID, they might encounter Christ and know his love, protection and peace and become one of his followers, one of his disciples.’

This movement of prayer, called “Thy Kingdom Come” suggests that we think particularly of 4 or 5 people that we

know and love, but who haven't come to know Jesus yet, and focus our prayers on them. This is not to ignore everyone else; of course, we want Christ's kingdom to come on earth and for all human-kind to be a member. However, as individuals, we can only do so much at one time. These 5 people with whom we long to share the joy of faith, may be some who have shown an interest in spiritual matters or have been supportive to us, but all will be precious in our sight, loved by us, and for them our prayer should be; "Come, to them, Lord Jesus. Protect them in your name!"

Because this is a time when actions often speak louder of care and love than mere words, demonstrate your care in practical ways. We can send messages and small gifts to let our 5 know how much we care, how much they mean to us, how much we are thinking of them. Let's serve them, if at all possible, by running errands, collecting food or medicines. Above all, during these eleven days, let's pray for our people in any way that seems fitting, pray in the way that only we know how to. Let's pray in our homes, pray as we walk or cycle, pray with candles, icons or music. Above all, we need to pray as Christ prayed for us, for those he loved, "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those you gave me .. because they are yours"

Amen.