

Seventh Sunday of Easter: Sunday after The Ascension

John 17:1-11, Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

“Holy Father protect them, in your name, that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one”.

I doubt there has been a day go by in these last few months when we have not either said or heard “my or our thoughts and prayers are with you or them” - maybe spoken for someone who we know to be sick with COVID, their loved ones, carers, people near or far away, or more widely for a world in deep trouble.

Sometimes words like that are the only thing we can think of to say, in the face of such challenging times and events. But there is prayer in them nonetheless because prayer can take many different forms. Whether it is a jumbled outpouring from the heart, an articulate expression of fears, hopes, joy or need, the learned pattern of the Lord’s Prayer, or stillness and silence. Long, or short, practised, or unplanned, it doesn’t matter - they are all prayer.

In his book ‘Barefoot Prayers’, Stephen Cherry says praying at such times when we are ‘perplexed’ or we could say, troubled and afraid, are not the only times we pray, but ‘it is at such times that we are likely to pray in the spirit of handing over to God what in truth we care about deeply.’

And in our Gospel reading we hear Jesus doing just that.

In an upper room with his disciples as he was about to go out to betrayal, he had described himself as ‘deeply troubled’ and in prayer was handing over to his Father what in truth he cared about deeply - those who he had loved.

The disciples heard Jesus say they belonged to the Father, given for a while to him: an assurance that they were each uniquely known and loved. And his prayer was for their unity and protection.

“Holy Father protect them... that they be one, as we are one”. This unity would bear witness to the nature of God to whom they belonged: an active, living relationship, without which they would be vulnerable, weak and unable to carry out the task he would be leaving them to do. It may be no co-incidence that the ‘I am’ saying of Jesus that precedes this conversation was ‘I am the vine’. ‘Abide in me, just as I abide in you’: an intimate and dynamic relationship which would nourish, sustain and empower them to bear fruit. And of course, prayer, however we practise it, is one way of keeping that relationship alive.

But his prayer was not that they would be one, so that they would have an easy or comfortable life, but because he knew it would not be an easy life. “They are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, - protect them...”

The disciples would face many dangers and challenges in the world. We read of some in the stories of Acts – and it is there too in the letter of Peter: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you..... Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you”

A little after the words we heard in our Gospel, Jesus said this: ‘As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world’. There was a mission to be undertaken and he was entrusting it to these people before him – knowing intimately their human frailty. He knew the challenges before them, their weaknesses as well as their strengths, so prayed that they might be one – not the same, not even in the same place, but each uniquely called, known and loved, and united in that. It was much more than a prayer for comfort – although certainly there was that in it- it was one of commissioning and empowerment for work and ministry in a challenging world.

But then Jesus prayed: “I ask also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their work”.

His prayer was also for us - we who have come to believe through the work they began - and he is handing us over to God – us who in truth he cares about deeply.

We too can hear that affirmation - we are uniquely known and loved by God, urged to grow in confidence in the word we have received and called to learn to live in relationships of unity so that our one-ness can be a living strength.

There will be times when we can see clearly what needs to be done. There will be other times as those we are facing now, when we may feel bewildered or even overwhelmed by the challenges

– whether it is because of intensely personal experience, or concern and anxiety for the world in which the church seeks to be a living, healing witness.

In such times as these when our normal pattern of being church is taken from us, we may long to ‘get back’ to how it was but know that things cannot be the same for some time. We may find we are called to leave aside our hopes and dreams and ambitions to serve God in different ways. We may discover God’s way takes us in directions that run counter to the way we might have wanted or planned for ourselves.

But we can be sure of this: in these times of trouble, or perplexity, Jesus’ thoughts and prayers are with us - he is praying for us - handing over to God what he cares about deeply. His prayer for his disciples has never ceased; it has echoed down the centuries and is being prayed for us today.

We may live in anxious times but we have the assurance that we are loved with an unfailing love,

we belong to God,

we seek to live as one

and under his protection we can and we will find the way live out our commission with integrity and find we are equipped to go on proclaiming a gospel of hope and of life.

Ruth Goatly