

Sermon for Sunday after Ascension 2020

“When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, ² since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” John 17.1-3

The 17th chapter of the gospel of John is one long prayer offered to the Father, by Jesus. Many years ago I attended a conference in a local church. The focus of the conference was to be the health of the parish and to explore how ministry could be improved or changed, or both.

The person leading the day began by reading the 17th chapter of John. It was not read as a Bible reading, but rather it was offered as a prayer. It took me a couple of verses to make the shift from reading the Bible to praying this prayer of Jesus. When the shift of mind was made the power of this prayer became more and more evident. Perhaps when we are offering our daily prayers we might bring this chapter to mind, and then intentionally pray our way through it. Praying with Jesus in this chapter can be very rewarding.

This is a remarkable prayer filled with insights into Jesus’ relationship with the Father. When we pray it we discover a very rich bond within the Godhead, and the reality of our life being a true gift from God.

In the first few verses of the reading today we discover that Jesus is praying for the disciples, his followers. He is asking that the disciples be protected from the world and from the devil. This is an acknowledgment that the world as we know it can never fully satisfy our needs. When we rely only on the things of the world we will always feel that there is something missing.



The world does not come with promises of hope and constant affection. For the most part the world is a place where people strive for power; where people climb over each other to gain a small advantage; where the rights of others are trampled for the well being of the few. If our whole life consisted only of the offerings of the world it would be a very hollow and cruel life indeed.

Jesus also prays that the disciples would be protected from the devil. We do not speak of the devil very often in this age. It appears preferable that we quietly ignore this negative influence in our lives and pretend that all is well. We pretend that the devil does not exist. Jesus prays that the disciples, and therefore you and me, will be protected from the devil. It is true that the devil cannot force us to do anything that we know to be wrong. Unfortunately, the devil can make those things and actions that are wrong to appear very attractive and maybe even innocent. It is important to be alert to the traps and snares that the devil may place before us. God will give us the strength to resist if we ask.

How does God protect us? We are protected in the name of God, in the name of Jesus Christ. When we call upon his name, in the name of Christ, we will be granted strength and courage to turn away from that which is wrong and that which may be a temptation of the devil.

Jesus continues in his prayer and he prays for unity. He prays that all Christian people would stand together, united in faith and bound together in the name of Christ. He prays that this unity may not be something forced and somehow suffered. Rather our unity is to be a unity of joy and delight. We are to rejoice in each other's company and we are to love each other. With our different denominations and expression of faith we tend to search for difference rather than rejoice in the faith we have in common.

It is Peter who makes the statement that *"Above all hold unfailing love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins"* 1 Peter 4.8 This is not to say that our sins are covered by the love of other people allowing us to continue to sin and cause hurt without conscience. The love that covers a multitude of sins is the love that God has for us. It is God's love that washes over us and cleanses us. It is God's love which is unconditional and offered without prejudice. We are in the first instance loved by God. God's love embraces and comforts and strengthens us. It is God's love flowing through us that will give us the courage to forgive the people who hurt and damage us. It is all God's love and we live and participate within its embrace.

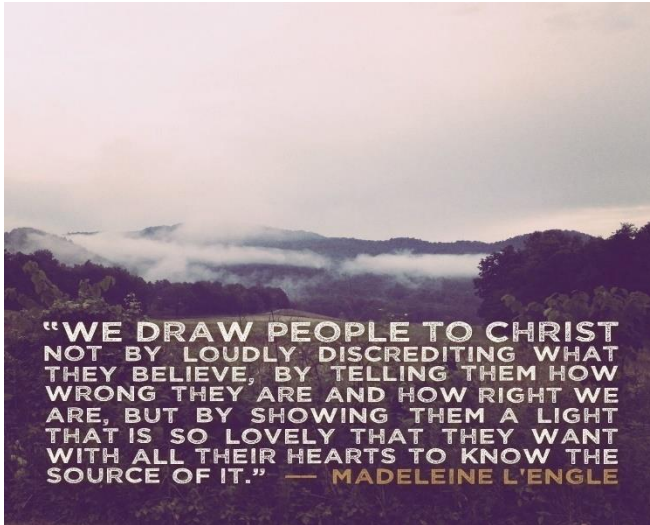
Jesus prays that the disciples may be dedicated in the role to which God has called them. We know that the disciples have been a poor example of unity. We know that one of them betrayed Jesus for the silver of the world and that he did it as a response to the temptation of the devil. We know that when Jesus was arrested and crucified they ran for their lives and hid. Now Jesus is praying for them and he is encouraging them to be dedicated to the role that is before them. The role that he has prepared them to fulfil.

This small group of people who have spent their entire ministry with Jesus teaching, encouragement and support. This small group of people who have not ventured outside of Palestine, are suddenly given the role to spread the message of salvation to the world. To conclude this section of the prayer Jesus prays that the disciples will be sanctified in truth. He prays that they will be made whole, that they will be made complete, by being the vehicles of truth in the community.

It is a huge responsibility and one that must have been truly intimidating. Jesus is about to leave the disciples and they will see him being raised into heaven. The ascension of Jesus leaves the disciples in a sense of being in no man's land. It is when the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost that they find new direction and conviction. The true birth of the church is Whitsunday, or Pentecost. This is when the disciples are truly armed for the contest between truth and deceit, between the world and the kingdom, between right and wrong, between salvation and the devil.

The power and the courage to do God's will is offered to us by God. We do nothing in our own strength. It is not us that people will ultimately follow. Our efforts in ministry must be to reveal our total and complete trust in God. Certainly, we have our God given talents. It is with these talents, these gifts, that we contribute to the kingdom of God here on earth.

While Jesus is praying for the disciples we understand that he is also praying for us. That which he asks for the disciples he also asks for us. These requests when answered give substance and



conviction to his prayer for us as he once again places himself firmly in the Godhead. The Ascension is Jesus' return to Glory and the validation of his ministry among us. *"I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me. ⁹I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; ¹⁰all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them."* John 17.8-10

This prayer in the 17th chapter of John is profound for it describes the relationship between the Father and the Son, and it also clarifies the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. With the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit the relationship between the trinitarian God and the people of God's creation is also clarified. We are the recipients of a love that is unconditional, undeserved, and pure. Thanks be to God.