

EASTER 7A 24-05-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 17. 22-31; John 17.1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, when the Church remembers the resurrected Jesus returning to God. Today is the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; National Sorry Day will be on Tuesday 26th; and the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation begins on Wednesday 27th.

So today, the last Sunday of the Easter Season, we look back as well as forward, and try to make sense of today's world.

We look back to Easter and the joy of resurrection, bringing hope and new life. We look forward to the promised Holy Spirit, whose ongoing presence we will celebrate next Sunday at the Feast of Pentecost. Jesus has ascended but the Spirit is his gift to us and his continuing presence with us.

In today's gospel reading from John, Jesus prays for all his followers, including us. He prays that we will know God and recognise that his life and work are windows into God's love; if we know Jesus, then we will know what God is like.

What does it mean to 'know' God? In this context, 'knowing' is not the same as intellectually understanding or knowing everything about God. This 'knowing' God is an experience that draws us into a new reality, in which God's vision for love and justice and service can be realised in relationships and communities today.

Knowing God is shown by our obedience to love; therefore, the eternal life of which Jesus speaks has deeply ethical implications for the present, and how we live today.

Jesus prayed that we will all be one in him; but we know that we are far from being one. There is disunity within the Christian community, as denominations disagree and argue about their differences.

The Christian community in which the writer of John's Gospel lived struggled to carve out an identity in a world that rejected its message. This helps us understand why John has Jesus pray only for the disciples and not for the rest of the world. For those early Christians, the 'world' was hostile and dangerous.

Jesus prayed, and asked God to protect us so that we may be one, as he and the Father are one. Why do you think we need protection? Perhaps it's easier to understand when we think of the early church, because they were a brand-new community of Jesus followers who were still working out what it meant to be 'church'. Everyone was suspicious of them, particularly their Jewish family and friends, and the Roman authorities weren't keen either.

We know that today there are people suffering persecution because of their faith or culture or ethnic background; but that's only in other countries, isn't it? Aren't we safe here in Australia to worship whoever and whenever we want? Aren't we a multi-cultural society that accepts everyone, whoever they are? Sadly, that is not the case. Certainly, we have freedoms that others can only dream about: a person's religion or ethnicity doesn't in itself prevent them from accessing education, health care, employment, or places of worship.

However, we know that some groups of people are seriously disadvantaged in our 'lucky' country. Indigenous people largely have shorter life expectancies, worse health, poorer education outcomes, and are more likely to spend time in prison than other Australians.

We need protection from ourselves, because I believe we are our own worst enemies. When we allow ourselves to be controlled by fear, we react in self-interest because our instinct is to protect ourselves. The primitive parts of our brains go into fight or flight mode, and we either pull up the drawbridges or throw punches.

This was apparent at the beginning of the global pandemic as people were madly panic-buying and stockpiling everything from toilet rolls to tinned tomatoes. Many were afraid for themselves and their families; and it took some time for things to calm down.

Perfect love casts out fear, says the writer of the first Letter of John; he goes on to say, 'We love because he first loved us.' Jesus loves us and expects us to love others, even when we find it hard or we don't want to or we're scared. The first commandment is to love God and the second- which is like it- is to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

It doesn't matter whether our neighbour lives next door or in China; it doesn't matter whether our neighbour is white, brown, pink, black or beige; it doesn't matter whether we like them or disagree with them, that doesn't let us off the hook. Jesus never promised it would be easy- that's why he prays for us. The world is changing more rapidly than we might have thought possible. This isn't the first pandemic the world has faced, and it won't be the last. Plagues of one sort or another have been around as long as humanity. We know more today about what causes and prevents viruses, and medical science in developing vaccinations has made a huge difference to our lives- but we still can't cure or prevent or even successfully treat all viral illnesses.

We are witnessing the tragedy of Covid-19 as it spreads from 'wealthy' countries- where it could not be contained, and thousands died- to countries where millions live in poverty, with little access to medical care or even clean water. Perhaps we are yet to see the worst effects of this pandemic.

If we want the world to be a better place for our descendants and the rest of the world, it is up to us to do better. It's up to us to consider what it means to live in God's reality, in which love is the basis of everything we say and do. How I choose to live can be all about protecting myself and my loved ones and making sure we live comfortably and happily; or I can choose to live out of an expansive and inclusive world-view, in which case I will make love the basis of all my decisions.

May God protect us from ourselves and strengthen us to resist the evil clamour of those who incite hatred and fear. May we look to Jesus to see God's eternal love, encouraging us to live as hope-filled, generous and welcoming people.

The Lord be with you.

