

**EASTER 7B 16-05-2021** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5.9-13; *John 17.6-19*

*(Jesus said,) '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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'*

How do we pray? More to the point- why do we pray? If God knows our hearts and our thoughts, why do we need to tell God anything? Doesn't God already know what we want and what we are concerned about? Is prayer a waste of time?

Some people think it is; I heard someone once say that you might as well argue with a thunderstorm.

Mother Theresa said: "Joy is prayer; joy is strength: joy is love; joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls." But Mother Theresa, towards the end of her life, testified that she had spent years feeling spiritually bereft, as if she could not reach God or sense God's presence. Still- she persisted, she kept praying and doing the work to which she was called.

Kierkegaard said, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes *the one* who prays." Perhaps that is the point of prayer: not to persuade God to do something, or to list a load of needs and wants and complaints God already knows about, but to change us.

How can prayer change us? How can folding my hands, closing my eyes, and talking inside my head (or out loud, depending on the circumstances) change anything about me? In fact- why do we bother?

We pray because Jesus prayed, and spent a lot of time teaching people how to pray. If it was important for Jesus, it's important for us.

Our reading from John's gospel today continues in this big section that is sometimes called the Farewell Discourse, as Jesus prepares his followers for his death and resurrection. In this transition time, when Jesus was preparing to leave, he prayed for the disciples and all who would become believers. The piece we heard today is from his farewell prayer.

Jesus is concerned to teach us to pray by example, so we need to listen carefully to his prayer. He speaks directly to God, addressing God as 'Holy Father' - as he can, because of the intimate relationship and connection between Father and Son. When Jesus gave us the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, he invites us to address God as 'Our Father', which is pretty amazing if you think about it; we are allowed and encouraged to call God Abba or Daddy- just as Jesus did.

Some people find it difficult to think of God as 'father', because they may have had bad experiences with their own fathers or other men. We should respect this, remembering that God is neither male nor female, and all our names for God fall short of the unimaginable reality. If we feel more comfortable calling God 'mother' or not using a parental term at all, and if it helps us to pray, then that's what we need to do.

Jesus prayed for all his followers, and said things in his prayer that God would have already known; so why did he do that? Was it for the benefit of those listening, and by extension, us? Probably; and perhaps when we talk to God and remind ourselves of what God has done for us, or of the situation we wish to bring before God, it helps us to name it and understand it better.

Jesus prayed for his followers and asked God to protect them, as he had protected them during his life on earth. He knew they would face persecution, because that's what happens when people live radically different lives to those who live around them.

However we all know that Christians were crucified or fed to lions or otherwise murdered by the Romans and others who followed; so why weren't they protected? Why didn't God protect them?

I don't know all the answers but looking closely at Jesus' words we see that he didn't ask God to stop the persecutions or to miraculously save the lives of the crucified. After all, once he had accepted that he was to drink the cup, Jesus didn't ask God to stop him from dying either.

Perhaps the protection he asks for is to protect his followers from losing their faith and losing their unity and joy- their hope in eternal life. As he said, we lose our lives in order to save them.

Jesus asks that we be set apart and sanctified, or made holy; we live in the world, but we are set apart because we are his people. He asks that we be protected from the 'evil one'; from anyone or anything that would lead us away from God and God's people.

We are to trust in God's word, which is truth, and stick with the truth always. Truth seems to be an increasingly rare commodity in this world of 'alternative facts', political-speak and fake news.

Humans are fallible creatures, and we get ourselves into all sorts of trouble- including even deeply religious people. We are set apart, sanctified, made holy: but that doesn't mean we are made perfect and will never sin again. That won't happen this side of the grave.

Our trust needs ultimately to rest in God, in God's Word, in Jesus, the One who will never fail us. And we do our utmost to be truthful people and to search for the truth.

When we see injustice, when we know lies are deliberately spread to support cruelty or corruption, we must name it and speak truth to power. As Jesus did, we stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the world; as we pray for them we must also do what we can to help them.

Perhaps that is the point of prayer: that as we pray, we are moved to act. We can't fix everything and shouldn't try, but we can speak the truth, refuse to accept anything less than the truth, and offer comfort and support to those who have been hurt by the lies and dishonesty of others.

The Lord be with you.