

John 17:6-19; Acts 1:15-17,21-26

13.05.18

*His prayer for us*

There is something deeply moving about the passage from John's Gospel that we have read this morning. Consider the setting. Jesus is assembled with his disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal. Earlier he has taken a basin and towel and has stooped and washed his disciples' feet, showing his deep affection for them. But of course there is deep sadness in Jesus' heart. Already one of the disciples, Judas, has slipped out into the night to betray him. And Jesus knows that very soon they will leave this room and the authorities will come for him and arrest him. And there will follow his trial and death of which he has spoken repeatedly and for which he has tried to prepare his disciples. And then what? That's the question. What lies beyond for this little huddle of followers? And as we picture Jesus and that little group gathered together as the darkness falls, we might see the future of these disciples in the candles that flicker and will soon fade and be extinguished. So where might Jesus' thoughts take him as he sits there with his beloved friends? Where would his mind wander?

Well, certainly at that Passover meal he would have looked back in time, back into the past and to the history that was so familiar to him, the story that was so crucial to his understanding of himself and what his ministry was all about. At that Passover meal Jesus' thoughts went back to God's people Israel and their long history. You see, God's intention had always been to have a representative on earth. God had liberated Israel from Egypt so that he might have a special people set in the midst the world and identified with him. Through them the truth of God and God's love would be revealed to the world. And through them the ways of God would be made known in a way that would shape the politics of the world and the way we live together. And so, through the witness of this chosen people, the world would learn about God and learn how to live.

Sadly, though, this had not been a happy story. Too often Israel had revealed not the truth of God but rather the dark side of human nature. Too often instead of revealing divine faithfulness and grace they had demonstrated human self-destructiveness and sinfulness. And that is a long

story that had taken many twists and turns but now, in this upper room, on this Passover night when they remembered a key moment in that story, Jesus looked around at his disciples, and what he saw in them was the nucleus of a new Israel, reconfigured and reimagined. What he saw in them was the embryo of a new people of God who would renew and fulfil Israel's ancient vocation and so bring light and salvation to the world. This is what he had called them for. And looking at that group you might have thought that he was mad. There they were, probably somewhat the worse for wine, sleepy, still uncomprehending about the mission Jesus was entrusting them with, and all of them certain to betray, deny or abandon them before the night was out. You can imagine Jesus despairing about the future of this movement he had begun with these unpromising disciples. And so Jesus does the only thing he can do. He prays for them. He pleads to the one he calls Father for them and their future.

And as he prays we can't help wondering what Jesus would have thought if he could have looked not just back in history but also forward, into the future, and if he could have seen what would become of this movement that he had begun. In verse 20 of this passage Jesus prays not only for these disciples but also 'for those who will believe in me through their word' – in other words for those who in later years and centuries would become the church of Jesus Christ, founded on their witness. What would Jesus have made of the Church that would bear his name?

Well, he would only have had to look a few weeks into the future to see the events of our second reading from the Book of Acts this morning unfold. There the disciples meet to replace Judas the betrayer and to reconstitute themselves as the new Israel, the core of the new people of God. And looking beyond that Jesus would have seen what we call the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit of God descended upon those disciples and transformed and empowered them. And suddenly they were out on the streets proclaiming that God had raised up this Jesus who the authorities had hounded to death and defying every attempt to shut them up. And as Jesus looks further into the future he sees his followers, his church, spreading through the ancient world, turning it upside down. But he prays to God to protect them, 'holy Father, protect them in your name...', for he knows they would be harassed and opposed and persecuted just as he was. And he would have seen how later, under Roman Emperors, unspeakable

things would happen to his followers as they are thrown to wild beasts and set alight and persecuted.

But then, as Jesus looks further into the future, he sees something extraordinary. He sees the Roman Emperor apparently becoming a Christian, and in no time the Christian faith is the religion of the Roman Empire and persecution stops, thank God. And that might cheer Jesus' heart except for one thing. This Roman Emperor became a Christian after having had a vision on his way to fight a battle. And in the vision he saw a cross of light in the sky and words telling him to conquer in this sign. And thus Christianity conquered and where once Christians were put to the sword for their faith now people are baptised at the point of the sword. And that might have brought tears to Jesus' eyes for in his prayer he says of his followers that 'they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.' And yet again and again he would see his church compromised and corrupted by worldly power.

And as Jesus looks into the future he would see his church arguing and quarrelling over doctrine and belief, and he would see eventually the rise of the Inquisition and the appalling suffering inflicted upon those who believed the wrong things and were branded heretics. And he would sigh and weep as he prayed, as he does, 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' for surely torture and fire are never the way to be sanctified in the truth. And he would see his church so often on the wrong side of truth, not least the truth and progress of science and the treatment handed out to people like Galileo.

And of course along with disputes and disagreements over doctrine there would come fracture and division. He would see in the 11<sup>th</sup> century what would become known as 'The Great Schism' dividing East and West, Orthodox and Catholic, dismembering the body of Christ. And further ahead he would see in the 16<sup>th</sup> century another great schism known as the Reformation, and the bitter conflicts and bloodshed that resulted from that breach, until all of Europe was sick to death of murder and mayhem in his name. Yet still it continued. And again Jesus' eyes fill with tears as he prays 'that they may be one, as we are one.'

That of course is not the whole story. Jesus would see too the Church bearing witness to its Lord and shaping society for the betterment of human life and the promoting of the common good. And he would

witness the lives of devout souls keeping the faith, and monasteries and communities like the Begijnhof right here caring for the poor and the sick and praying for the world and keeping the light shining in the darkness. And as he prayed those words, ‘As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world’ his heart would lift at the mission of faithful Christians, the new Israel, God’s representatives on earth.

And how might this passage address us today, in places like this where the faith is in decline and his followers becoming few? Well, the vital thing about this passage is that it presents Jesus as praying for us, his church. This is what is sometimes known as his ‘high priestly’ prayer. So last week was Ascension Day, recalling Christ’s ascension, as Lord, to the right hand of God. But remember what he is doing there! He is praying for us and praying for the world he loves, and our prayers are so weak and distracted but there is a greater pray-er than us, who gathers up our prayers in his and offers them to the Father. And that is good news when the church fails and it seems so weak and compromised. For 2000 years, through all the ups and downs of the centuries, Christ has stuck with us and we have been held fast in his prayers. And so we are still here. And if that is a comfort to the church it is also, surely, a word to us personally. After all, the ups and downs of the church, the suffering, the faithlessness, the trials – these are features not just of the life of Christ’s body but also the lives of us, its members. And on the basis of this passage of Scripture from John I would simply ask you, what might it mean to you this morning that Christ is praying for you? How might that touch your life this morning? Might it bring peace and reassurance, that as Christ is committed to his wayward church in prayer, so he is committed to you. Indeed, he’s not just praying for you but praying with you, sharing the burden you feel for others and for the world. Of all the things that we believe Christ does for us, surely this is central – he prays for us, lifting us and our lives and our feeble prayers into God’s loving heart.

One last thing, however. Christ’s ministry as our high priest who prays for us extends beyond the church - and to the world he loves, and we need to know that. In the light of events that have taken place this last week it might be easy to despair of this world and of peace and justice. Coupled with landmark events in the days ahead it seems the middle east is destined to be a quagmire of hostility and conflict and displacement. And

as events unfold we hear grotesque echoes of this prayer of Jesus here in John: we witness worldly power flexing its muscles; we witness division and fracture and the dismembering of humanity; we witness a world not sanctified in truth but desecrated by lies – as always happens with war. It's easy to despair but God has a word for us: beyond the world's turmoil Christ is ascended to the right hand of the Father. And he's praying for us. And our prayers share in his, and so we pray in confidence. Amen.