

Protect Them

John 17.6-19

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word within us,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

This is the last Sunday in the season of Easter, and it falls between Ascension Day – which fell on Thursday just past, and Pentecost which we will celebrate next Sunday. That is, we are poised in our Christian story between the lifting up of the risen Christ from earth into heaven - and the descent of the Holy Spirit – we are left alone – for a second time since the three days of Easter - and waiting to see what will happen next.

The seasons of our tradition take us deeper and deeper each cycle into the great mysteries of life. Christ is coming, Christ is born, Christ dies, rises, and ascends, and Christ will come again. Understood in a mystical way, any or all of these states might apply to any moment in our lives. It is true to say the Kingdom is already here and is still to come. We live in a state of already- but-not-yetness. Here, between Ascension and Pentecost we are also focused on the not-knowingness of life. And to be honest, isn't that pretty much the normal state for most of us? We often say – ‘You never know what will happen next’ – and the challenge is to live in hope and to help bring about the future we wish to see.

But this is not always easy, as Jesus knows. In today's gospel we wind back the liturgical clock to the Upper Room - after Jesus has washed the disciple's feet, and foreseen Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. In the last moments before his arrest, Jesus prays to God to protect those he has loved and protected. Despite his promise that the Holy Spirit will not leave them comfortless, there is a sense of lambs being left by their shepherd to fend for themselves amongst wolves and poachers. In his last moment with his friends, Jesus hands them into his Father's care – he intercedes for them - those who have received the wisdom and truth he came to impart.

“I am asking on their behalf ... on behalf of those 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 ... 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.”

“Protect them” for the world, which is about to crucify Jesus, “has hated them.” They do not belong to the world but they are to stay in it and testify to the truth “Protect them from the evil one” – protect them from the forces of violence, division, oppression, falseness. “Sanctify them in the truth,” as they are sent into the world.

I have paraphrased, and there is so much tied up in these complex verses, but to focus on two aspects: Firstly, if we see ourselves as one of “them” - as disciples, and friends of Jesus - what a wonderful thing, an awesome thing, to know that he is glorified *in us*, and that his joy is made complete *in us*. In us! As much as we are being left, we are being commissioned, and welcomed as co-creators of the world to come. We are to join *and even complete* the divine circle of self-giving love.

Secondly, I want to focus on the very act of Jesus praying on our behalf – of asking for our protection. He asks because this divine commissioning puts us in danger. It marks us out, it impels us to put our heads above the parapet, it sends us “out there” into unknown and possibly hostile territory. It's a risky business, and so he prays for our protection.

There is anguish in Jesus' prayer. He is on his knees and asking the Holy Father to protect his friends, because he fears for them, just as he later throws himself on the ground, filled with dread, and asks if the cup of suffering might pass from him. (Matthew 26.36-41) Prayer, is above all, a cry of the heart. Jesus prays for his friends because he loves them. Our parish prayer circle is constantly asking on behalf of others for healing, or peace of mind, or giving thanks for happy outcomes. And this feels entirely right and natural. Prayers of this nature form in our hearts before they ever

appear on our lips, or in our prayer books. Perhaps you have prayed in pain and desperation. Perhaps you have felt unable to pray and asked others to pray for you. Perhaps you will be asked to pray with another as Jesus entreated the disciples to stay with him through that dark night of the soul. May we stay awake a little longer than they.

Alongside this call of the heart, aching at the thought of leaving loved ones behind, there is also the question of why Jesus *entreats* and intercedes for this protection? And in turn, what is it we see ourselves doing when we pray for and on behalf of others? Traditionally, we have used the term “Prayers of Intercession” or “Intercessions” but that is often replaced now with the phrase “Prayers of the People.” There are several reasons for this, but personally I am more comfortable with the new phrase because it aligns with my understanding of prayer as the formation of an intention to care for others and for the earth - rather than a request for divine intervention. If it were the nature of God to intervene, then might not God intervene to avert hundreds of COVID-19 deaths in India and around the world this week, or to prevent the next statistic on our road toll, or eradicate cancer? Intercession can all too often fall into simplistic calls for intervention, yet neither is a simple statement of good intention sufficient – or true to our instinct to look beyond ourselves, to connect with a greater power.

So, prayer often takes the form, as in Jesus’ prayer, of *asking* - asking for personal strength or asking for good things on behalf of others. Jesus prays “I am asking .. Protect them in your name” This is not a call for intervention - he does not ask his Holy Father to take them to a safe place, or to change the course of their lives, but to protect them, as they go into the world. Perhaps the concept of blessing is helpful here. Blessings come in all shapes and sizes and it would be wonderful if they flowed freely between us. They can be a casual and daily reassurance, or a powerful force at more momentous turning points in our lives. The Celtic theologian John O’Donohue asks and answers:

“What is a blessing? A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal and strengthen. Life is a constant flow of emergence. The beauty of blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds”ⁱ

This is not a form of intervention, but rather

“when a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbourhood of loving kindness. In the light and reverence of blessing a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way.

In a dead wall a new window opens; in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. ... Let us begin to learn how to bless each other ... May we all receive blessing upon blessing. And may we realise our power to bless, heal and renew each other.”ⁱⁱ

Have you felt the power of blessing flowing into or through you? I remember Bp David Murray confirmed me with the extremely firm pressure of his hands on my head, and a number of times in this church when we have been part of a circle of blessing – but blessings flow in many other settings, and from the land itself – Have you felt upheld by others (don’t be afraid to ask!) or felt the power of heartfelt blessing flow through your own hands? (don’t be afraid to try!)

Jesus asks for the blessing of protection upon his friends he is about to leave– he makes it clear that he is not asking that his friends be kept from the world, nor does he pit them *against* the world - he sends them *into* it. He sends them into it to continue his work, to challenge the false world of materialism, aggression and other life-negating states, and to create a truer life-giving world founded in love and unity.

And as we go into the world, and our lives unfold;
May we seek Christ’s blessing of protection upon one another;
May we carry the glory and joy of Christ’s love safe within us.

ⁱ John O’Donohue, *Benedictus: a Book of Blessings*, Bantum Press, 2007, p. 210.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, pp.14-17.