

Sermon for Easter 7B

The Text: John 17:6-19

Jesus often spent time in prayer. Jesus also taught a great deal about prayer. In Matthew chapter 6 and in Luke chapter 11 we have some of the extended teaching of Jesus on prayer. This teaching incorporates Jesus' gift to his disciples of what has become known as 'the Lord's Prayer'. This prayer is the model prayer that we can pray just as it is and it is also a model for our prayers, teaching us so much about how we are to pray to our Father in heaven.

But for all of the teaching of Jesus on prayer and for all of the time he spent in prayer, we have surprisingly few examples in the Bible of what Jesus actually prayed. We are given a snippet of his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed: *'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will'* (Matthew 26:39). And a little later, *'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done'* (Matthew 26:42).

Of the seven sayings of Jesus from the Cross, three of them are prayers: *'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'* (Lk.23:34). *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'* (Matt.27:46). *'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'* (Lk.23:46).

And then there are a couple of other examples of Jesus' prayers recorded in John's Gospel account. In chapter 11 Jesus prayed at the tomb of Lazarus. He said: *'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me'* (11:41-42). And in chapter 12, as his death drew near, Jesus prayed: *"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"* (12:27-28).

Apart from these few examples, more often than not Jesus would go off by himself to pray and the content of these prayers are unknown to us. And that makes sense, doesn't it? On the one hand prayer is a corporate activity, conducted publicly in church worship and family devotions. But on the other hand it is a very personal matter, where the vast majority of our prayers are likely to be private conversations, one on one, between us and God. Why should we imagine that it was any different for Jesus? But in our text for today, from John chapter 17, we have the longest example of an actual prayer of Jesus. The whole of chapter 17, in fact, is

Jesus praying. As a result, this makes it a pretty key piece of Scripture – especially when you consider its context.

This is on the night when he was betrayed, either just before going to Gethsemane or on the way there (see John 14:31 & 18:1). Jesus has just shared the Last Supper with his disciples and has given them some significant teaching in preparation for the time after his ascension. And now Jesus prays for them.

Here we have Jesus praying for his disciples at the climax of his ministry and for once we have some extensive content of one of his prayers. I imagine that the disciples would have been quite interested to know what Jesus was saying *about* them to his heavenly Father at this time and what he was praying *for* them.

This last Thursday we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus, where we rejoice that Jesus has come home to his rightful place at the Father's side in heaven. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans:

'Jesus...is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us' (8:34).

Jesus is praying for us to our heavenly Father, even as he was praying for his first disciples that one night long ago. So do you think that we might be a little interested in knowing what Jesus might have to say *about us* to our heavenly Father and what he is praying *for us*?

We might be very interested, although we need to be careful what we wish for. You see, Jesus was praying this other prayer on the night when he was *betrayed*. During the course of the Last Supper the disciples had still been arguing about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24), they had been told that one of them would betray Jesus (John 13:21), that their chief spokesman in Peter would deny him (John 13:38) and that all of them would scatter and leave him on his own (John 16:32).

Under these circumstances would you really want to be privy to what Jesus was saying about you to our Father in heaven? Given the way you and I let Jesus down do we really want to hear what he has to say about us? If we didn't already know the content of his prayer, we might expect there to be a fair bit of frustration vented, maybe something like this:

'Father, are you out of your mind! Look at what you have given me to work with here! They just don't seem to get it. Your plan will never work as long as they are part of it!'

But this is not what Jesus prayed at all. Here are some excerpts of what he said:

'Father, you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word' (v6)

'I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them' (v8)

'They knew with certainty that I came from you and they believed you sent me' (v8)

'Glory has come to me through them' (v10)

Such generosity and graciousness on the part of Jesus is absolutely staggering! Here is our Lord, on the night when he was betrayed, denied and abandoned, praying to his Father in glowing terms about his disciples. Despite how things might appear on the surface in the disciples' lives and despite their many struggles and failings, Jesus truly interceded for them, demonstrating his great love for them and respect of them.

This is the kind of Lord we want in our corner, interceding for us at the Father's side. We don't deserve to be treated with such generosity and graciousness – but it is sure nice to be. This is how Jesus prays for us – with love and respect. This is the kind of glowing terms he uses to describe us before our heavenly Father in prayer. This may also cause us to think how we pray for others!

This should give us a greater sense of urgency when it comes to our part in God's plan for our world. Despite what appears to be happening on the surface of our lives and despite our many struggles and failings, Jesus can still talk about us to our heavenly Father in terms of our obedience, acceptance and faith. Jesus can still see God's glory unfolding in us in ways we can't even begin to imagine.

But Jesus also knows we need help and protection and he prays about it for us. He knows that we are up against it when it comes to the calling that is upon our lives to serve him in his kingdom. We are very much in enemy territory. As Paul said to the Ephesians: *our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (6:12)*.

So for all of the glowing terms Jesus uses about his disciples and, by extension, us, he also has some very specific prayer requests for us. He says:

'Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so they may be one as we are one' (v11)

'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one' (v15)

'Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth' (v17)

In these three prayer requests we see clearly the heart of Jesus for us. He wants us to be protected and united by the power of God's name – which is the name of Jesus himself. There is so much that has the potential to divide us – from the petty squabbles that can arise amongst us, through to serious conflicts. Some of our anger and disappointment at our brothers and sisters in Christ can seem justified to us in our hurt, but Jesus is praying that we may continue to be one in him. If we are divided

we are vulnerable and exposed to attack. If we are united in the love of Christ, a love that empowers us to forgive one another, then we are under God's protection.

And Jesus does not want us out of the world, not yet at least. It would be far safer for us to be tucked away in heaven. But for the time being there is work for us to do, a calling on our lives to serve our world. There are still a lot of right places and right times that we need to be in where God's glory will be shown through us. And as we do this, Jesus is praying for our protection from all evil.

And part of that protection comes about from being secure in his truth. Earlier in John's Gospel account Jesus said, *'I am the way and the truth and the life'* (14:6). And earlier still we heard that *'the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us'* (1:14). So when Jesus prays for us to be sanctified, made holy, in the **truth** and that God's **word** is truth – he is really praying that we would be made holy in **him**. That's why he can speak of us in such glowing terms. His holiness and glory is unfolding in our lives as we remain in his word.

Our Lord Jesus is at the right hand of God and he is praying for us. He loves us and respects us, despite our struggles and failings, and he will see to it that we are kept safe as he continues to reveal his glory in our lives. Amen.