

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Sermon Text – John 17:6-19

Theme: “Called to change the world”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The fall of humanity from the glorious relationship God intended for all people created a problem that only God could resolve. God enacted his plan of salvation through his Word given through the Old Testament prophets, then by sending his Son Jesus Christ to fulfil the prophecy concerning him (John 3:16). God’s Word did not go out and return empty but achieved the purpose which he willed (Is 55:11). God’s Word changed lives. People were restored back to their Heavenly Father by believing God’s promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Like an individual’s baptism, God’s work of salvation was not a one-time event but is rather an event which was completed with Jesus’ death on the cross. As baptised children who now live out our baptism in daily living, we join with Jesus in his *ongoing* work of changing the world in which we live.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

We are God’s People

Today’s gospel reading is the first half of what is called, “The high priestly prayer”. It is Jesus’ prayer to His Heavenly Father to protect those who are faithful to God’s Word and to sanctify them for the work that is now before them.

What comes before this prayer are Jesus’ words to his disciples revealing the truth that he has overcome the world. Jesus has defeated the evil one, not by using the force or the weapons of this world, but by submitting to the authority of God’s will. Jesus said, “No”, to the things of this world; and, “Yes”, to the things of God.

Now that Jesus has spoken these words to his disciples he turns his attention to his Heavenly Father to pray for his disciples. The first part of Jesus’ prayer is to share the reasons why he would be praying for his disciples. In the first place, Jesus’ followers are God’s people. These are the people who believed God’s promises given through the prophets and God has entrusted them into Jesus’ care.

A good question would be, “Why were *these* people chosen to be God’s people? Or, “Why were the Israelites chosen from all the nations that lived on the earth created by God?” The answer is a conundrum that both confounds us and gives us great hope. There is no particular reason why God chose the Jewish people, or why he chose to give some of the Israelites into Jesus’ hands and not others. We might be tempted to say, “Wait a minute, that’s not fair.” But remember two things: 1) God’s forgiveness and mercy is pure grace. It’s not something that can be earned or that we decide on our behalf. It is pure gift from God. 2) God works through his people to bring his peace to all people. Just as the Israelites were to be a blessing for all people, so Christians today are to be salt and light for all the world to see the love of God at work in and through daily lives.

Does this mean we are deserving of God’s grace, that somehow we have earned the right to become the children of God. No, and that’s the miracle of God for us today. But even while we were still sinners, still deserving of God’s eternal punishment, he has filled us with his Holy Spirit and so we stand with Jesus and we bring his peace to those God puts us before.

Protected by God

Having reminded his disciples that they belong to him, Jesus tells them through his prayer that he is no longer in the world, although *they* are still in the world. Jesus is describing a ‘now but not yet’ situation where he is telling his followers what will become even though it is not apparent at this early stage. Jesus’ prayer now begins to focus on what it will mean for his followers who are going to remain in the world, even once he has returned to his heavenly throne. Those remaining in the world will be subject to torment and temptation from the evil one who constantly seek their destruction.

You might expect Jesus to pray for his Heavenly Father to remove those who are faithful to his promises from the danger. Perhaps to put a little protective bubble around them so they won’t suffer the

hardship and hurts inflicted by the challenges of daily living. But in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus doesn't pray for you to be removed from danger but that you be protected from the evil one. He said, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" (v15). Just as Jesus kept the disciples that were given into his care, all except for Judas who allowed Satan to enter his heart, so we who are in his care will be guarded from the attacks of the devil.

If Jesus intends for us to remain in the world, amid the danger and temptation, he has not left us defenceless. St Paul encourages you to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might and to put on the whole armour of God. With God's strength and armour you will be able to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph 6:10-12). This is not a time to withdraw or to stand around helplessly wringing our hands at the seemingly endless string of bad news stories in the world. We have been given the armour to protect us from whatever Satan might try to attack us with and we have been given God's Word which is his sword. And like any offensive weapon, the only way we become more skilled in wielding this powerful weapon is by practice. Read God's Word, not as a chore, but as a discipline which will protect and equip you to defeat Satan with God's strength and power. Trust God's Word which says, "he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13).

Called to change the world

So Jesus wants to protect you because you are one of God's children. You are Jesus' sister or brother and he cares for you and is willing to stand with you. God has given you the means of defending yourself with his mighty strength, his armour and his Word which is the sword by which you will defeat Satan and his attacks. Now we are to continue in Jesus' work of changing the world in which God has placed us.

You see, the thing is you have already been saved. There is nothing that you need to do in order to be saved. You know that Jesus has done all of the work for you. And it is because you are saved that you can now join with Jesus in bringing about good changes to this world. If God had not intended for us to change things, surely he would have whisked us off to safety. Isn't that what God has planned for you? A place where "he will wipe away every tear from your eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore" (Rev 21:4). Yes, this is the promise that God holds out for us in Revelation but while we are still in this world, there is work to do.

Now we could engage in a Christian programme of reducing our carbon emissions, we could organise a wonderful recycling programme, or we could embrace some other way of saving the planet from whatever the next ecological disaster is that is going to befall us. And whilst all of these are worthwhile endeavours that I would applaud as being responsible stewards of the world in which God has put us, I think the answer to our work lies in Jesus' challenge to the Jewish leaders to destroy the temple and he will rebuild it in three days (Jn 2:19). Jesus wasn't referring to the cold stones stacked on top of each other, but rather his body as the living temple. As Christian people, you are now living stones in temple of Jesus' one body here on earth.

So the work of changing the world in which we live is not about saving the planet, but changing the lives of the people that God has put before us. Jesus is working through you as you witness to his saving power in your life. Every time you stand fast in the presence of Satan's attacks and temptations, you are being watched by those around you. For those who are perishing the gospel will seem as foolishness, but for those who are being saved, they will ask you questions. They will want to know the reason for the hope that is in you (1 Pet 3:15). In this way you will be changing the world, building up the body of Christ, not to win your salvation, but by bringing Jesus into the lives of others so they too might come to know him and for the Holy Spirit to deliver into their hearts the salvation Jesus won for all people.

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.