**16th May 2021**

**Call to worship**
Come; let us unite in worship
of the one who offers us protection, comfort, and joy.

**A prayer of approach**

Gracious God,
set apart as your people yet together in your world,
**we worship you as one.**
Emboldened by your power,
protected by your promises and filled with your peace,
**we worship you as one.**
Upheld by your word,
inspired by your truth and named as your friends,
**we worship you as one.**
Keep us safe in the world.
Keep us praying for the world.
Keep us serving the world.
**As one, in Jesus’ name.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Forgive us, gracious God,
when we have turned away from your word
and immersed ourselves in the distractions of the world.
Forgive us, when we have sought to belong to the world
and compromised your truth to fit in.
Forgive us, when we have bickered among ourselves
and not shown the world that we are one.
Forgive us, when we have distanced ourselves
from those you have called us to serve.
Forgive us, O God; protect us and unite us.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Gracious God,
we thank you for the enduring prayer of Jesus for his disciples
which reaches and reassures us today as we walk in their footsteps,
reminding us that we are not alone
but protected, empowered, forgiven,
and surrounded by your grace every step of the way.
**Amen.**



**John 17.6-19**

**Sermon**

I came across this story of a church minister’s conversation with one of their congregation. It reminded me of a number of conversations I have had with some of you:

Maggie was talking to her minister about her husband George. ‘He never goes to church, but he always wants me to go. Every week he says the same thing as I leave the house: “Say one for me.” You’d think he’d come along and say one for himself!’ The minister remembered Jesus’ unceasing prayer for his friends, and his promise to give them whatever they asked in his name. ‘If Jesus prays for his friends and his friends pray to him, maybe your husband feels that your prayers connect him to Jesus.’ And that made Maggie think about how she might encourage George to pray, so that he could also say one for her.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Our Bible passage today, from John 17, has Jesus saying one for us. The passage is set just before his arrest, Jesus prays for his friends that they may be one as he is one with the Father. He asks that they may be protected in the uncertain times they face and made holy – i.e., set apart from the world’s unbelief – by the truth about who Jesus is.

The way in which Jesus prays helps us to understand the breadth and potential of prayer – not a formula of words, but an ongoing conversation and relationship with God/Jesus that helps to inform and shape everything that we are and everything that we do.

***This week we explore Jesus’ prayer for his friends in uncertain times. And consider how we pray for each other and the world.***

When the schools were closed, young people of all ages had to learn how to motivate themselves to study. Without the prompting of teachers, many found this hard. Does an active prayer life require similar encouragement to schoolwork?

As patterns of worship have changed during the pandemic, we’ve had to change the way we pray. Some of these changes may have been really tough, but perhaps also rewarding. Other changes may have been easier, but as we progress through the government’s roadmap, do we really want to go back to the way things used to be?

Have you tried new ways of praying as a result of the various lockdowns? If you have, have you found this experience refreshing/rewarding/difficult? Are there ways of praying that you’d like to carry on practicing? What has been helpful and why? Think, as well, about the types of prayer that you’ve missed and whether returning to live services might help you to reengage with them.

In the days between Ascension Day, that was on Thursday and Pentecost, next Sunday, there is an ecumenical initiative Thy Kingdom Come, encouraging Christians to unite in prayer and seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. There are lots of different prayer ideas, podcasts and you tube clips to encourage you in ways of prayer. We hope to have a day of Prayer next Saturday to focus our attention on praying for God to be at work in us, our church, our community and our world. If you want to book in for an hour slot then drop me a line.

This passage is taken from the account of Jesus’ last words to his disciples at the supper before his arrest. He prays for those he will shortly leave through his Passion. There are echoes of the Lord’s Prayer in Jesus’ address to God as ‘Father’ (v.5ff) and his prayer for protection from worldly powers of hatred and evil (vv.11,14,15; cf 16.1-2). It is as if Jesus looks for the coming of God’s kingdom in the unity, joy and faithfulness of his disciples (vv.11,13,17).

Our Lent studies and United Services were based on the Prayers of Jesus and it included this one.

It is known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus or the Farewell Prayer. It is often a sobering act and a poignant thing to think about what would be your last words and testament to those who you love. There are three petition cycles to this prayer. Jesus sums up his ministry and prays for glorification in the first 5 verses of chapter 17. Then he prays for his disciples in this section. Finally, he prays for those who will later believe through the testimony of his disciples.

His intercession for his people is an indication of his love. Intercession is not an exercise that seeks to put things in perspective or put people in their place. Rather it is about embracing others in the love of |god – it is personal, informal, relational -without argumentative or judgmental elements.

His prayer for his disciples, for you and me, is about his love wrapped round us all. He is preparing to return to his heavenly Father, but he also bears a burden for the future of the work he has begun. He is leaving the world, but we, his disciples are remaining in it – that is the basic motivation of this prayer.

I often feel for the disciples. They saw Jesus crucified, dead and buried, then they saw him resurrected and back to life. Now they have to let him go again -with the ascension and the vague enigmatic promises of waiting for His Spirit to empower us.

As the Father sent Jesus with a mission into the world, Jesus likewise sends us to continue his work. For this reason, Jesus’ main concern is for the protection of the disciples in the face of the world’s hostility and the destructive agenda of the evil one (verses 14 and 15). He asks that the disciples be kept through God’s name (verse 11). Since God is powerful, his name can be taken as synonymous with his power (e.g., Psalm 54.1).

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a cause for concern at the moment. Palestinian Christians often find themselves in the middle of it.  A Palestinian Christian named Rana, living in Bethlehem has told Premier Christian radio the current violence between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza is the worst she can ever remember.

Rana, who works as a translator, said:[[2]](#endnote-2)

"There is a lot of trouble and extra tension on the streets. We have never seen this level of violence. It's so much violence, it's even in the streets. It was like a kind of a civil war between Palestinians and Jews. This is something accumulative, I would say, because of all the tensions that we've been living with for the past decades and years and it's all kind of exploded now."

Rana described how the violence had come after a very difficult year in Bethlehem and Gaza.

"The situation was bad anyway. With Corona, Bethlehem was closed with no tourism, so the economic situation is so bad. "Yesterday, I saw reports asking people, especially young people, not to move alone because the Israeli settlers were threatening to attack using weapons and knives so for especially young men, it's hard to be out in the street by themselves in areas like Jerusalem, because we have reached this level of a kind of street war."

But Rana says she takes comfort from her faith:

"God only gives us strength and have mercy on us in the coming days and maybe weeks because God knows what's going to happen."

We can and must pray for God’s protection for those Christians and the Spirit to be at work to deliver that area from hate and division.

Four Christian men have been beheaded in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The attack on Tuesday is the second in the last six months. This attack is believed to have been carried out by Islamic extremists belonging to the terrorist group, East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT). Indonesia is rated at number 47 on Open Doors' World Watch List, an annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution.

The Barnabas Fund reports that a second Covid-19 wave in Nepal has coincided with a wave of anti-Christian hostility in the Hindu-majority country.[[4]](#endnote-4)

For Jesus the purpose of his prayer asking God to keep safe the disciples is that they may all be one (verse 21). Unity is not an end in itself, but a necessary prerequisite for effective witness. Jesus in the next section also prays that the believers may be one as he and the Father are one. The bottom line is that they way believers treat each other reveals the authenticity of their relationship with God and qualifies the effectiveness of their testimony to the world about the gospel.

Unity presupposes not so much organizational unity as the tearing down of all dividing walls, because a new creation is experienced in Christ, the working of God’s power in the lives of people becomes visible in reconciliation with God and with one another. The differences and richness and complexities of human existence are not denied in this new state of existence, but they are bridged by focusing on a common goal: bringing glory to God. It comes as a result of transformed hearts. John 17 reflects the depth of transformation which Jesus believed his followers would experience. By sharing in this spiritual bond, drinking of the outpoured spirit, believers experience the reality of God in their lives.

Unity comes by focusing not on ourselves and our needs – but on working with others for the glory of God.

Jesus describes the disciples as those who are ‘in the world’ yet ‘do not belong to the world’ (v11,14) The expression stresses ‘separation of values, not of geography’. The disciples are called to reflect the character of Jesus, rather than to align themselves with the world’s spirit. Like other Old Testament characters, Moses, Jonah, Elijah it is always tempting to want to escape. Get me out of here! That request is not granted here. Jesus sends them back in to continue the work God has called them to do. Instead, he prays that they will be preserved from falling prey to the designs of Satan. The prayer recalls the last petition of the Lord’s Prayer: deliver us from evil – or as the original Greek says, from the evil one.

In his petition that the disciples might be kept, Jesus speaks of his joy, expressing his desire that the fullness of his joy might be experienced by his disciples. That joy is linked to them trusting his word and directing people to the Father, with whom building a relationship of confidence results in the experience of joy. Therefore, the joy of Jesus followers is not dependent on external circumstances but follows from the certainty of belonging to God. The prayer implies the words of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit as a second comforter as mentioned in the previous chapters are an adequate replacement for the bodily absence of Jesus.

* Jesus’ disciples would soon be bereft. Those for whom John wrote were being scattered and persecuted. Jesus prayed for his followers. How does it feel to know that Jesus is praying for us? Does it help us to pray for others?
* Invite you to be still and quiet, and to imagine sitting on a bench with Jesus beside you. What would you like him to pray for you? What might he say to encourage you?
* Now imagine that you are sitting on a bench beside someone going through a difficult time (it could be someone they know). Ask: What would you pray with or for that person?

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Lord Jesus, as your disciples in the world today,

we thank you that your word of truth,

your prayer of power and your heart of love,

continue to protect, inspire and unite us

as we live out our faith,

build up our relationships,

and hold the world before you in prayer.

Amen.

**Prayers of intercession**

Once again, the tensions between Israel and Palestine have reached the news cycle. We pray for the peacemakers in that area. Hold them from despair, give them the energy and vision for a better future that will keep them going during these difficult times. Help the local politicians and those in the international community who are trying to mediate and resolve this crisis. Equip them with the skills they need, give them the words that will speak into this situation and help those who need to hear listen to their words and cease their fire.

Lord, in a dark hour,
**let your light shine.**

As we roll out the vaccine in this country and celebrate a return to something that feels more normal, we are aware that this is not the experience of many people around the world. The scenes and stories from India and Nepal are deeply upsetting. We pray for help to arrive, for oxygen, doctors and for relief for those suffering. As things improve for us may we not forget to pray for people around this world who still face many dark days battling coronavirus.

Lord in amongst the pain and suffering,
**let your light shine.**

In the aftermath of the local, mayoral and crime commissioner elections we pray for everyone who has either lost or gained a job. Give people who are leaving their posts a sense of closure. Help them as they move on to something new. May they take the experience they gained and find ways to use it to empower and help others.  For those who find themselves with a new job, give them the grace and humility needed to get to know new colleagues and work out what is required of them, and as our towns and cities emerge from coronavirus give us all patience with each other as we re-establish how to work and live with one another.

Lord, in a world of losses and gains,
**let your light shine.**

The blossoms on the trees and parks filled with plants and flowers at this time of the year remind us of the wonders of the natural world. But we are well aware of the difficulties facing our planet. The issues around climate change can feel overwhelming but we pray that the church has a voice in the debate and that we face up to our personal responsibilities.

Lord, in a world challenged by the climate crisis,
**let your light shine.**

In uncertain times we thank you Lord for the relationships and friendships that have carried us through: for those who have made us laugh, for those who have listened, for those who have stood by us. Thank you for the love, care and attention of others. Help us to learn to pray as Jesus did. As we move through this week and encounter our friends help us to pray for their needs and that they would know your peace in their lives.

Lord, in all of our lives and friendships,
**let your light shine.**



**A sending out prayer**

As we leave this place, Lord,
may our prayers be just beginning.
May our worship, our time here,
what we have learned and what we have discovered,
lead us into action and lives full of worship
every hour of every day.
We ask in the name of Jesus,
whose whole life was an offering of worship to you.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/113-may-june-2021-b/easter-7/explore-and-respond [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/it-s-out-of-control-palestinian-christian-says-violence-in-gaza-is-the-worst-in-memory?utm\_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=12365360\_daily%20news%2013%20May%202021&dm\_i=16DQ,7D168,KCOFX7,TVNMY,1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/christians-beheaded-in-attack-in-indonesia?\_psrc=personyzePopularArticles [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ogbl#inbox/FMfcgxwLttDKPZMswTZJrVmnFbrbLjNq [↑](#endnote-ref-4)