

GOOD LORD PROTECT US

John 17:1-11/Easter 7, Sunday after Ascension

I don't know whether you noticed but our gospel reading this morning is a prayer. We know it is a prayer because at the beginning of the reading it says that Jesus looked up to heaven and spoke to God – & I can't think of anything better which describes the act of praying.

And I suppose the next question we need to ask ourselves is, 'Who was Jesus praying for? And indeed what was Jesus praying about?'

Verse 8 tells us who he was praying for. And he was praying for those who believe that He was sent by God and that by believing in Him, they would have eternal life.'

That is who Jesus was praying for. Well who are they?

They are Jesus followers, the believers, you and me! And his prayer was for our protection, once he had ascended to heaven (verse 11) – something we celebrated on Thursday, Ascension Day.

Now surely, if we are aware that Jesus was praying for our protection, don't we need to ask ourselves, 'what it is that we need protecting from?'

I am sure if the police officer came and knocked on your door and advised that you needed 24 hour police protection, you would probably feel a little bit concerned. And the first question that you would ask the Police Officer is who do I need protected from?

And in a similar way we also need to know a little bit more about why we need God's protection, and who we need to be protected from.

Well, one clue is in our baptism service. It is the Christian initiation service and it is where we welcome new believers, and they also make a public declaration of faith in that service.

And so in the baptism service in response to the minister:
Do you turn to Christ? The candidate says, *I turn to Christ*
And in response to the question, 'Do you reject the devil and rebellion against God?' The candidate replies, *I **renounce** them*

In the 1928 prayer book which many of our older members of the congregation will remember, it uses more illustrative language.

'Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the pomp and vanity of this wicked world, and the sinful lusts of the flesh.'

And hopefully the baptism service liturgy and the 1928 prayer book version with its illustrative language makes it clearer that we are in a battle. And that is why Jesus prays for our protection. If you are in a battle you need protection or else you've had it!

One of the areas that we need protection from is our own sinful desires. The New Testament contrasts, 'Life in the Spirit, with Life in the Flesh.' If you rearrange the letters of the word Flesh you get the word 'Self'. And I think you would agree that we have to do daily battles **with ourselves**. It is a constant struggle to put others before ourselves, or to set aside our own desires and listen to what God may be telling us, or putting on our heart. So that is one area of our lives that we do daily battle with.

Another battle that we face is with the world and all its appeals. There are so many tempting things in this world aren't there? So many things that can lead us astray? When Jesus was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness he was shown the kingdoms of the world – money, power, status! You name it, it was the Devil's temptation list. And the Devil will also try to lead us away from God's plan in our lives.

And we need to ask ourselves the question - is this what God wants me to be doing? Whether it is in our workplace or in our leisure time. Is this what God wants me to be doing? Does this action glorify God?

Another area that our Lord protects us from is from spiritual evil. Now the devil would love you to think that he doesn't exist, or if he does, he is in the form of some fictional man with red skin, a set of horns on his head, and a long pointed tail, carrying a pitchfork. Certainly that type of imagery is unable to explain the amount of evil in the world.

Now the New Testament has a much more developed understanding of evil, even more so than the Old Testament. It depicts the spiritual realm as a battle in the heavenly places, and again it is something that our Lord wants us to be aware of.

Do you ever wonder how a thought comes into your head, or how a person or indeed a whole nation can go from being seemingly normal to carry out some of the most brutal and heinous acts?

Saint Paul made his churchgoers aware of this in Ephesus when he said,

'For our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God.'

(Ephesians 6:12)

Now some may think that because we battle against the world, the flesh and the devil, we may as well withdraw from the world. But in the prayer that Jesus made on behalf of his followers in our Gospel reading this morning it is quite the opposite. Jesus makes it quite clear from our reading that he wants us in the world – otherwise he would not have left his followers in the world when he ascended to heaven. And of course he promised to send the Holy Spirit to help us in that endeavour. *But just because we are in the world does not mean that we should be of the world.*

The Christian in the world can be likened to a boat in the water. The boat is in the water but the water is not in the boat. In fact, if the water gets in the boat it becomes unstable, and leads to disaster. And in a similar way we must not let false teaching creep into the church and into our lives. And so as followers of Christ we must be wary of the world and its allure, and indeed those forces behind it. The way we come under Christ's protection is to be obedient to his word, and recognise that the mind is the great battleground of temptation. We are told in the New Testament that we should make every thought that comes into our mind captive to Christ. That means that our thoughts and our actions should be consistent with our Lord's teaching. That is quite a battle for me, and I am sure for you also!

As I come to the end of my sermon I hope that you will feel comforted by our reading this morning. I know that these past seven or eight weeks since lockdown have not been an easy time for many people. A lot of us are beginning to feel fed up with the constraints that this virus has imposed upon us. We are not able to see families and friends, brothers, sisters, children and grandchildren. And even if we are lucky enough to see our loved ones it is from a distance - we are not able to embrace them. I can see that it is not an easy time for us as a church, for our village, and indeed for the country and the world. But be assured and indeed comforted from our Gospel reading this morning. The Lord is constantly praying for you and all his followers this morning, and we in return must keep his Word. **AMEN.**