

## Sermon for Church at Home on Sunday after Ascension, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020

*Lord we ask you to pour into our hearts the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we might be empowered for the work you call us to do. Amen*

I want this morning to speak to you about something I'm passionate about – prayer – and to invite you into a special space of reflection on prayer: the prayer of Jesus, and the prayer of his earliest disciples. So come along in... step into this space, and allow yourself to think again about something so key to our lives, but about which we often don't give a second thought.

We are of course at a unique point in our Christian year, between Ascension and Pentecost, and this is put in context by our first reading from Acts – which includes both Jesus' promise to the disciples, immediately before his ascension... 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you'... **and** their waiting space, afterwards, in Jerusalem. For we hear that in the upper room, the disciples were 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer.'

So let's imagine, for a moment, what it was like for the disciples, after Jesus has left them, waiting in prayer, expectant of his promises, but not knowing what the future would look like, or the explosion of energy that would result, at Pentecost. I wonder what it would have felt like, for them

– after the roller coaster ride of Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection, and the 40 days which followed, in which they were overjoyed at his presence, and ate and drank with him?

And it's a waiting space that we too, with all our emotions and needs, our highs and lows - after two months in lock-down - are invited to enter today, during this unique period, leading up to Pentecost; because we too are encouraged to be honest about our experience, to be united in prayer, and to be expectant of the Holy Spirit, not many days from now.

And all around the world, many thousands of Christians are following the Archbishop of Canterbury's 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative, joining in prayer, in order that God's work might be done in our world today. We may not, this year, be able to pray together physically, at St John's, but we can still pray – where we are – knowing that we are united, and that God is with us. So do please take note of the resources in our special Parish Voice online, from Ascension to Pentecost, and linked to the 'Thy Kingdom Come' website.

Like Holy Week, it is a vital period – full of potential- and one in which we enter this sacred space, of prayer, waiting on God, and seeking to be equipped and transformed for the work that he calls us to do.

So if Acts 1 offers us a waiting space – like the disciples’ upper room – what about the prayer of Jesus, in John 17, what kind of space does that offer us? + Here, I think, we get to the heart of the matter, in terms of what prayer is and what is going on here.

For here we enter holy ground, a deeply sacred space, as we listen to Jesus’ great prayer, just before his betrayal and arrest, in Holy Week. And we hear words of profound depth, as Jesus prays – among other things – for his disciples. And there are two things that we notice in particular: firstly, that Jesus has made God’s name known to the disciples, and he prays that they may be protected in that name; and secondly Jesus asks that the disciples may be one, as God is One. So let me just take those two ideas in turn; ideas full of depth and power, and see what they have to teach us about prayer.

We need to remember, in the Bible we’re told that God dwells where his name is known. Names, in the Bible, are incredibly important: so just as, for you & me, our name matters much, it’s part of our identity & God knows each of us by name, God’s name is even more important. So when Moses meets God at the burning bush, in Exodus, God reveals himself as ‘I am’; ‘I am who I am’. And it really matters that the disciples too have discovered God’s name; for it means that they know God, and have met him, in Jesus Christ, who reveals God to them. +Jesus asks God to protect them in his name: in other words by his presence with them.

And secondly, it matters too, that the disciples are called to be one, as God is one. Because what Jesus is asking here – in this sacred space – is that the disciples, who have met God and know his name, will become part of the very life of God: in other words, that being one, being united, they will somehow know God, who is also one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So what Jesus’ great prayer in John 17 tells us about our prayer is quiet astonishing, because what it says is this. When we pray and read the Bible and follow Jesus, God indeed reveals his presence, his name and his word, to us; something that holds and protects us. And secondly, as we grow in this prayer, we become part of Jesus’ own prayer, dwelling within the very of life of God, the Holy Trinity, himself.

And as we do this, through his grace and love, abiding with God and in God, through the Holy Spirit, we are naturally equipped – as a consequence - for the work he calls each one of us to do, overflowing with God’s love, and making Christ known in the world...

Now I don’t know about you, but if I stop to think about some of these things, in the Bible, it rather blows my mind! So I want to suggest, in the end, as Chris did - last week – that prayer & knowing God, isn’t primarily about head knowledge, but about the heart: it’s about real experience, full-bodied, and stepping into that experience of God, that divine grace, at the heart of our everyday life and struggle in the world.

And I want to leave you, therefore, as I encourage you to pray – in a special way, this week – with three pictures of prayer, which bring us down to earth, and visualise what we've been talking about: prayer as entering your own room; prayer as inhabiting the heart; and lastly, as we anticipate Pentecost, prayer as the transforming fire of God's Holy Spirit.

In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus teaches about prayer, he invites his followers to 'go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' So like the disciples in Acts, in the upper room, Jesus invites us to enter into a special place, your own room, wherever that might be, to pray: and it doesn't have to be your bedroom (!), it can be anywhere. And it's here, as we bring our needs to him, as we wait on him, that God himself comes to us, through his Spirit, to animate our prayer, and show us what to do.

Secondly, the heart is also a picture for prayer, because in Ezekiel God promises to give us a new heart; and in Romans we hear about the Spirit of God that dwells in us, in our hearts. So in prayer we enter not only a special room, where God is, we also enter into our own heart, where God is at work, and through which – over time – we enter into the very heart of God, through the prayer of Jesus.

And finally, prayer as the transforming fire of God's Spirit. The disciples didn't yet know what the future would bring, and neither do we. But at Pentecost they would receive the Holy Spirit as wind and flame, with tongues as of fire alighting on them. And it reminds us, as we pray, that God is at work transforming – through the fire of his love – the world; he's transforming us, he's transforming those who are suffering; he's with scientists and health workers; he's transforming our church, our communities, our world; we're all part of this great tidal wave of transformation.

Yes, prayer is one of the chief means by which God is at work, and enabling us to play our part, in his coming Kingdom.

So, I invite you, this week, like the disciples in the upper room, simply to spend time with Jesus – whether it's through entering your room, or going for a walk, or in quiet contemplation...

I invite you to listen to Him, through his Word, through reflection on your experience, through art or literature, attending to what is on your heart...

And I invite you – with Christians all around the world – to pray 'Thy Kingdom come', through intercession for the world, in all its need; that the fire of God's love would transform, heal and bless, and draw many to him.

Prayer may not be easy – it can certainly be a struggle, as life often is – but here, like the disciples, we enter a sacred space, to wait on God; here, with Jesus, we offer our hearts to God, that He might come and dwell with us; and here we are equipped by the Spirit for His great work.

*Amen*