

*human vulnerability:
worrying problem or holy possibility?*

a sermon preached on the
seventh sunday of easter

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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Acts 1: 6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17: 1-11

Here we are at the last Sunday of Easter, the Sunday before Pentecost, and our lectionary moves us away from stories of encounters with the Risen Christ to passages that concentrate our minds on the departure of Jesus from the world. In Luke's ascension story, that we've heard this morning, the apostles are keen to know if they've reached the end, asking Jesus "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"— but Jesus firmly directs their attention away from the end-time they are so keen for— he wants them to think about the in-between time, when they will be blessed with the Holy Spirit and when they will have work to do as "witnesses throughout the world". But of course, the disciples don't quite get it; they stand "gazing" up into heaven, mouths open perhaps, and it's then up to the "two men in white" to re-direct their attention: "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" they ask. And this is the question that delivers the apostles out of their wishful thinking and puts them back on the road to Jerusalem.

John doesn't have an ascension story with clouds or men in white but in the verses we have heard today, it seems that Jesus is moving himself out of the picture. As he looks up to heaven, he speaks of his work being "finished", of "no longer being in the world" now that he has completed his work. He is on his way out of the world, on the way to the one he calls Father, and at this point his mind is full of thoughts about how it will be, after he is gone, for the ones the Father has given him.

What struck me as I read over these verses this week – and a bit beyond them, you might like to look at the rest of this passage later . . . what struck me is Jesus' loving concern for the ones he is about to leave. Towards the end of our set passage we hear Jesus say "Holy Father, protect them in your name . . ." and in the verses just beyond this he says: "I protected them in your name", "I guarded them" and "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one". A little later in the prayer, he asks for the same protection for those "who will believe" in Christ because of the "word" of the apostles, which I take to be all of us here this morning!

So why all this emphasis on protection? Why is this prayer uppermost in Jesus' mind as he contemplates leaving the world? This is the question I'd like to explore with you this morning.

Jesus utters this prayer on the night when his arrest is looming; the night when Judas will hand him over, when the 12 who love him so much will remain in the shadows, when Peter, who has told Jesus: "I will lay down my life for you", will deny knowing him. It seems to me that what is looming large in the mind of Christ at this time is his sense of human vulnerability. There is no "OK then, I'll be off, you'll be fine" here: Jesus does not underestimate the power of our vulnerabilities: they can de-rail us, they can put us off course, so that we become lost to ourselves, to each other and to God. And on this night, he is not thinking about some abstract, theological proposition, but the particular vulnerabilities of this particular group of people who have accompanied him in his work. Sometimes I get to the end of a particularly challenging/fractionous/dismaying week at school, and I wander home thinking to myself "too much humanity", my own included! . . . I do wonder if Jesus ever had such thoughts!

Of course, vulnerability is not just something that Jesus observes in others – it is a way-of-being he actively, positively chooses for himself when he faces Satan in the wilderness. As Luke tells it, Satan tempts Jesus three times with the attraction of invulnerable life and three times I don't think God made us to be timid – indeed we are powerful creatures in many ways and we can use our resolve and strengths and insights and skills to nurture what is good and lovely and true. But it is also the case that we are often creatures at risk. To put it in more religious language, we are open to, and succumb to, various temptations: the temptations of efficiency or of worldly approval or despair or self-indulgence; we are susceptible to not taking our lives seriously, spending our time on things that are trivial. We are vulnerable to the temptation to deny our humanity and pretend we are invincible. We are sometimes at risk of clinging to the past, and we quite like blaming others for the problems in our families, our workplaces, our schools, our churches, in ourselves.

Sometimes we don't deal easily with the vulnerabilities of others. We can get on our high horses, be judgemental about those whose need for security or a quick fix – leads them down rotten routes (we only need to look at some of the newspapers and magazines we buy to see that exposing the weaknesses of others can be quite profitable). The other side of that coin, of course, is that there are times when we don't deal easily with our own vulnerabilities. We can be intensely frustrated by our weak spots, our Achilles heels – we rant and rail and wish that we were greater and more powerful, more insightful, more effective people than we are.

This is not Jesus' way. He does not despise the friends he has travelled with for their frailties; he doesn't give them a departing speech telling them they will have to pull their socks up, or be "men", when he is gone. At this point in John's gospel, he doesn't say anything to them actually. Rather Jesus prays for his disciples, for them (and for us, remember!). He prays that they will be surrounded by God's protecting presence, and that that protecting presence will be there to remind them, when they need the reminder, of how fully they are accepted by God. Then, rather than being lost, or harmed by the evil one, or caught up in lies, these precious apostles might choose to go more deeply and truly and joyfully into communion with God and each other.

In the last chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus appears to 7 of the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, he makes a point of speaking directly to Peter. There is no reminder of Peter's denial of Jesus, rather Jesus challenges him express his love for his Lord by directing his attention to the Lord's flock? "Feed my lambs", Jesus says to Peter. "Tend my sheep", "Feed my sheep". Three times Peter betrayed Jesus, and three times Jesus invites him to discover more deeply what it means to follow the way of Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate the presence of Christ's spirit with us . . . let us live for the next week mindful that our daily vulnerabilities, our mistaken attempts to get to the end without having to go through all the mess of the middle, our tendency to resist life in its fullness and settle for something that doesn't actually satisfy, our wish to stay looking at the clouds rather than tackle our real vocation – all these things, and so many more if we were to compile a list together: all these things are deeply known, accepted and cared about by the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and all of them, all of them, may be offered to the God who will not despise the offering, but who will use this moment of honesty to draw us more deeply into the glory of life. To that merciful God be all honour and praise.