

# *prayer of the ascending redeemer*

a sermon preached on the  
*seventh sunday of easter*

13 May 2018

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The lections: Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5: 9-13; John 17:6-19

Each Sunday, at the heart of the 'ministry of the word', we hear a portion – a relatively brief portion – from one of the four Gospels. If the portion deals with specific Gospel events or a narrative, or some of Jesus' standalone teaching or a parable, then it doesn't matter a great deal if we do not know the context. But today's Gospel does not fit into any of those categories, and without understanding the context, the words of Jesus we have heard in this section of John's Gospel can just wash over us. They sound fine – very fine – but it is hard to know where they fit into the Gospel, and therefore how to apply them to our own faith journey.

So we need to see them into the broader picture that the author of John's Gospel is presenting here. The background scene to this section was actually set four chapters back, in Chapter 13. That chapter recounts the Last Supper, the account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and then Judas heading off to betray him. The following three chapters are still set in the Upper Room, with the remaining disciples listening to what the scholars describe as the 'farewell discourses', where Jesus explains to his disciples the meaning of what is happening, and what is about to happen. From their various questions and interjections, it is clear that they are really not getting it – as indeed their behaviour over the terrible days that follow makes plain. Remember that they variously abandon him, deny him, and apart from St John and the women disciples, hide behind closed doors far away while he is being crucified.

The long farewell discourses culminate in chapter 17, in Jesus' final prayer, about half of which we have heard in today's Gospel reading. After this prayer, at the beginning of Chapter 18, Jesus and the disciples leave the Upper Room and go to the Garden of Gethsemane, only to be quickly confronted by Judas leading a party of soldiers and police, who arrest Jesus and take him away.

So today, we have listened in to Jesus praying to the Father for his disciples just before these ghastly events happen. And he is praying not just for the disciples there in the Upper Room with him, but also for his future followers – for us. What we have before us today is Jesus' prayer *for us* at the point of his departure from his earthly ministry. This prayer used to be termed the 'High Priestly Prayer', but now it is usually called the 'Prayer of the Departing Redeemer' or the 'Prayer of the Ascending Redeemer'. On this Sunday after the feast of the Ascension, when the Risen Christ returned to the Father, that last name is deeply meaningful – the Prayer of the Ascending Redeemer.

This prayer, at the time when Jesus' heart was full of foreboding for the terrible suffering about to come, is his profoundly selfless act of love and care for that fragile little band gathered around him. He who had protected and guarded his frightened little flock throughout his earthly ministry, now called on his father – and *their* father – to protect them from the evil one. He was truly the Good Shepherd, now more than ever, concerned for his confused and vulnerable sheep. He longs for them to share the deep joy of communion, of unity, with the Father as he does, even as they remain in a world where that communion means they are hated. He prays for them to be holy. And he prays that they might be one, as he and the Father are one.

Two thousand years later, what does this loving prayer mean for us?

During this Easter season, the lectionary has given us a great deal of teaching on love. Each Sunday the second reading – the Epistle reading – has come from the first letter of John. And John's letter – John's teaching in general – focusses on love.

Just two weeks' ago, we heard John's great pronouncement about love (1 John 4:7-11):

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Do we *really* hear that teaching? We know only too well that love is an easy four-letter word to say! It can be nothing more than mere sentiment. This will be very apparent today, Mother's Day. Lots of mothers will be hearing words of love that bear little relation to the way they are treated by their children and family the rest of the year. Many women actually find this a very hard day. Some have been seriously mistreated by their children, or at least neglected. Loving words and a pair of slippers once a year cannot make up for that.

Just this past week Pope Francis commented that love is hard work. Yes, hard work. It is not champagne and roses. It is hard work in marriage, in family life, in friendships, at work, in the community and in parishes. Love is not what we say, but what we do. It is not about sentiment or nice feelings or words – it is wanting what is best for others, working for what is best for others, and often that means facing and naming the truth, no matter how hard that might be. It can mean, at least figuratively, laying down our own lives for others.

Jesus' prayer asks his Father to protect his disciples, 'so that they may be one, as we are one'. That is often taken as an imperative to ecumenical activity – that all the different Christian denominations might work together to become one church. But it means far more than that. It is about our loving unity as Christian people in every context – between churches, yes, but also within our own Anglican Communion, in our national church, in our diocese, and hardest of all, within our parish, as we know.

But take heart. The risen and ascended Jesus is still praying this prayer *for us*; he is present with us in our love for each other, giving us the strength and the wisdom to love in deed as well as word. Let us humbly join Jesus' prayer, and pray that God will protect and guard us, will sanctify us in the truth, and will help us love one another in truth, so that we may be one, as God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are one.

God of love, make us so mindful of the love from which we came, that we may know more the love to which we go, and in this love abounding, daily abide. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.