

Year B Easter 7

Acts 1: 15-17 & 21-26

1 John 5: 9-13

John 17 6-19

Our gospel reading today is the major part of a prayer Jesus makes to God.

It helps to understand the context of this section of John's gospel. Jesus is in the upper room at the completion of the last supper.

- ✝ Jesus has washed his disciples' feet as a practical example of what he has told them to do; to love one another just he has loved them, and to lead by humbly serving others.
- ✝ Jesus has told Peter that he will deny him three times before morning.
- ✝ Jesus has told his dearest friends, the disciples, that one of them will betray him that night.
- ✝ Jesus knows that within hours he will be separated from the disciples, they will be terrified and will flee.
- ✝ Jesus knows that he will undergo suffering and be killed.

This was his last few moments of what one can think of as normality with his friends before everything will suddenly change. And what does Jesus do?

He doesn't pack in even more teaching. There is only so much people can take in, after all. Jesus decided that the best use of his limited time remaining is to pray to his father. This is a prayer that starts in verse one, and which in our reading we pick up today in verse six.

This prayer is called the 'high priestly prayer' and many Biblical commentators say it is John's version of the Lord's prayer. It isn't

easy to memorise, it is long and quite rambling, and when we read it we can sense the urgency, the passion and the emotion in the prayer. It is, for me, one of the most earnest prayers you can find in the whole of the Bible.

It is a prayer asking for the disciples to be protected from harm, it is a prayer of trust and hope in God's actions. It is like a prayer that a parent may offer up as a child heads off to far away places, out of all reach and protection of the parent. I am sure all of us parents have found ourselves offering some sort of prayer like that in our lives.

Jesus is praying to God for his extended family – not just the twelve disciples that grab the headlines. Jesus is praying for the whole community of followers and supporters that had slowly developed over the years. Jesus knows that they have been called to be evangelists, and they will face tough times. It would have been far easier for them to become a religious order and set themselves apart from the world, causing minimal offence, and inviting in those who heard about them. But that isn't what they were going to be called to do. Like Jesus' ministry they were to be in the world, travelling and spreading the good news.

This model of praying for a community, undertaking intercessory prayer for each other and for the world is what we do our best to replicate here at St James. We take our role as intercessors seriously. Daily, at Morning Prayer, we pray for our world, we pray for all that is wrong in the world to be healed. In our prayers we find ourselves in solidarity with victims of injustice, and as we grapple for words we find ourselves guided as we pray to identify and denounce the root causes. We pray for all unjust structures to be dismantled and healed. We pray for broken relationships to be healed. We pray for peace of the deepest and most perfect kind; shalom.

In searching for the words to use, to express what sits in our hearts, influenced by the Holy Spirit, startling things can happen. It is as if we

have a strong searchlight that reveals the truth, the sort of truth that means we can walk in the way of life that 'will set you free' (John 8:32).

When I stop and wonder why we pray, I can come up with several answers.

- ✝ Firstly, Jesus prayed. He prayed to God on a regular basis. As we read in the gospels, often early in the morning Jesus would find some quiet time to be with God. In the example in this reading, Jesus was praying an intercessory prayer. In other prayers he prays for guidance.
- ✝ Secondly, at times of crisis, the most natural and innate thing to do is to cry out to God. It is an involuntary cry, based on our identity as being made in God's image and of being a unique child of God, loved by God.
- ✝ Thirdly, prayer changes me. When I pray well, I describe a situation where God's love and the action of the Holy Spirit is needed and in the process I can get a real sense and feeling for the issue. In so doing it effects a level of empathy in me that I don't think would be there without prayer. In prayer I am led to not just consider the immediate issue but its roots causes, and to pray for those to be changed.

So prayer helps me analyse and understand issues and challenges me to be accountable. By that I mean two things: one, to reflect on what actions I take that may contribute to injustice and suffering; and two, are there any actions I can take to change the situation I am praying about.

Prayer can be unsettling. It can personally challenge us, turning the light onto ourselves and asking us how we can be more faithful to Jesus' radical teachings of love. Praying for starving children or people suffering from disease may lead us to consider whether we should be doing something practical to help – more often than not

financially supporting a charity, but sometimes offering time and skills. Prayer can also be unsettling if it turns the searchlight back on us and makes us reflect on our values, and our behaviours, on how we spend our money, on where we invest our savings, on how we vote, on how our silence can be complicit.

Prayer is powerful. Jesus knew that otherwise in those last precious minutes with his disciples in the upper room he would have been doing something different.

Prayer is mysterious. I can't answer when or why or how prayer is answered. I know it is not based on how I pray, or if I am a 'good enough Christian', or the 'right sort of Christian'. But I know prayer is answered sometimes, and hardly ever in the way I expected.

Prayer changes things. I am most aware that it changes me when I pray.

One of my favourite stories about prayer comes from the biography of Eric Liddell. Apologies if you have heard me recount this before, but it is worth the retelling.

In the internment camp in Weisin in China, Eric led the teenagers in prayer every day. He always prayed for their cruel Japanese guards. One of the teenage boys challenged Eric about why should they pray for the guards. They all knew the guards did not pass on the medicines and food sent by the Red Cross. They all knew the guards could be violent and be unjust and harsh in their treatment of the internees. Eric responded by saying that he hoped his prayers would change the guards, but most importantly he knew that praying for the guards changed his own attitude towards them. He was not full of hate and anger for the guards. The teenager must have taken all that on board as not many years later he became a Christian missionary in Japan and stayed there for most of his life.

I shall be running a session on leading Intercessory prayer soon, so watch out for the invite, whether you are a seasoned intercessory prayer or someone who would like to come on to the rota. Refreshing and reflecting on our practice, or learning the principles of intercessions is a good thing to do.

In our gospel reading the prayer Jesus is praying is intercession, asking for God's protection over those he loved, his own faith community. As we pray our prayers of intercession we know that Jesus intercedes for us, he bridges the gap between God and humanity.

May all our prayers of intercession lead us to a greater love of our own faith community, greater love for those we don't love, greater love for the community we live in and our neighbours throughout the world, and may we be open to our prayers disturbing and changing us.