**John 17: 1-11**

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

**This is the gospel of the Lord**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Thursday just gone was Ascension Day – the day forty days after Easter, on which we remember the return of Jesus to the Father in heaven. We are now in the ten day period of waiting between the Ascension and Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples to equip them for their call as the first Christians to spread the gospel and continue Christ’s work on earth.

Ascension has been called the queen of feasts – we used to get a day off school for it. In a way, everything else depends on it: it celebrates the fulfilment of Jesus’ life on earth, so that the Holy Spirit can come into and among us. By Jesus’ absence, God is with us for ever. It is the point from which Jesus’ kingship can be exercised unlimited by space and time. It is far too important a feast to be celebrated mid-week, when most people save church-going for Sundays, but since Easter is always on a Sunday, it is inevitable that the Ascension always isn’t.

So the Ascension sets the scene then for where we are this morning. Liturgically, this is an in-between time; the ascension has happened and we are waiting for Pentecost.

It strikes me that there is a similarity between the disciples’ experience and our own at moment: they had been told by Jesus to wait. He had promised to send the Holy Spirit, but quite when and how, they had no idea. They didn’t know what was going to happen next, nor in what timescale. And neither do we. Watching and waiting is all we can do.

Or not quite all. This is a recurring theme at the moment: the disciples went back to Jerusalem, back to the place they had been staying in, as a mixed group of the twelve and assorted hangers-on, men and women together – and they prayed. They hunkered down together as a community, and focused on their life together with God.

We, too, have been finding new ways of continuing to be together, and realising how fundamentally important it is: the more I grow as a Christian, the more I come to see that it is not really possible to be a Christian in isolation – faith is lived out in community, though there are many ways, as we are finding, of expressing that community life.

Many of you will know David Pickthall, as an organist and as a big band leader. Music is also something that is best lived-out in community, and I have smiled at the way David has used technology to make music – he has spliced – or whatever it is one does - videos of himself playing a variety of instruments so that he is his own band. And we have all seen, I’m sure, groups of people making music in the safety of their own homes, which have then been joined together to sound like ensemble or choir or orchestra. And you see more and more pictures of people filling the screen simultaneously until it is a grid of tiny thumbnail photographs making a glorious sound. Is that not what us praying together is like?

All sorts of other activities are flowing out of these new ways of being church. Church congregations are notorious for holding tight to their individual identities as worshipping communities, but I have heard of multi-parish benefices which have been obliged to come together on Zoom for services and who have agreed that they want to continue to come together even when Zoom services are no longer the norm. We think we are just hanging on in there, but then when we stand back and evaluate, we realise that we have grown and are growing through these experiences.

Looking more closely at today’s gospel now: this is the so-called high-priestly prayer of Jesus and it is interesting on a number of counts. Firstly, that it comes here out of context: in terms of Jesus’ life, this prayer is prayed before the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, and it was a means to reassure the disciples and to give them comfort in these scary times. The reason for putting it here in the lectionary for us might be not dissimilar: to reassure us all in this time of waiting for the Holy Spirit – not coronavirus-related, but because the coming of the Holy Spirit was stepping into the unknown. Waiting, for anything, can be unnerving.

Second point: mostly, when we pray, we speak to God alone – and while we are told many times in the Bible that Jesus spent time with God and went off by himself to pray, we aren’t usually privy to the content of the conversation. But here, we are. …

On a small number of occasions, Jesus uses prayer as a means of teaching – think of that time when he raised Lazarus, when he says, pointedly: Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **I** knew that you always hear me, but I say this on account of the people standing round, that they might believe you sent me. …

So here again, he is reassuring the disciples. They are going to face trials and persecution and suffering and he will no longer be around to take the rap, to deflect the hatred onto himself.

Life is going to be a joy but it is also going to be jolly difficult on occasion. We are encouraged by the intimacy of this moment to make this prayer our own. Can we picture ourselves in that grid of so many faces that I talked about a minute ago? We are being invited into this relationship of Father, Son and disciples, not as onlookers but as participants.

This ‘eternal life’ Jesus talks about is knowing God as Creator, as Redeemer and, very soon, as Sustainer. It is not a future state; it is the here and now, being in relationship with God.

The disciples are currently at risk: the world that hated Jesus will hate them too. They will risk being pulled back into worldliness because it is easier than going against the flow and risking conflict or ridicule. But this is God’s calling for each of us: that we should know ourselves to be loved children of God, and that we should love as He loves us. And live that out in the world.

In a spare moment in the coming week, pray through this prayer again, but this time think yourself into place as a disciple – Jesus is praying this prayer over us too – and as such, it is full of joy and hope, not fear.

As we wait for the Holy Spirit, and prepare to celebrate Pentecost together next week, let us be aware of God’s love for each of us and of His presence with us, even – or maybe especially – in uncertain times.

**Amen**