

24th May 2020

John 17: 1-11

There are two readings this morning. The first reading is from the first letter of John, chapter 5 reading from verse 9.

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

The second reading, about which we will be thinking, comes from the Gospel of John, the 17th chapter and verses 1 to 11.

After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to those you have given him. Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work which you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of this world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. All glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name - the name you gave me - so that they may be one as we are one.

Jesus was not a man for lengthy public prayers. The Lord's Prayer is very concise and he is recorded in St Mark's gospel as warning his followers to watch out for teachers of the law who for

a show make lengthy prayers. And so when we come to look at Jesus's longest recorded prayer, by far, we immediately realise that he is dealing with things of the greatest importance. That is also shown by the time when this prayer was prayed; just before he led his disciples out of Jerusalem, through the valley of Kidron to Gethsemane, knowing that he was already betrayed, as John makes clear in the next chapter. I would think from what the gospels record of that evening that the disciples were still not expecting things to come to a head in the way that they did and so soon. Jesus knew and we need to see the prayer in that context.

He starts by looking to heaven and praying to his Father for himself. Now this very act has led many sceptics, cynics and heretics, as well as people of other faiths, to comment that this shows that Jesus is not really God. They tell us that it is nonsensical for God to pray to God for God - it is, at best, like talking to oneself. If Jesus were God, they say, he would not need to pray to God.

I doubt whether many of the people who have made this superficial comment have bothered to read on to the 5th verse of this prayer where Jesus prays that he may be glorified with the glory which he had in his father's presence before the world began. This is not an ordinary man praying. This is a man who has shared and was part of God's glory before the world began, before time itself. This is someone who can say 'before Abraham was, I am'.

The people who separate Jesus from God have anyway usually a very inadequate view of God, seeing him as being rather like a super-man writ large. They seem to have made God in their own image not fully appreciating that a God who can create a universe as wonderful and complex as we begin to know it to be must have an awe inspiring magnificence beyond anything which we can begin to comprehend. There is therefore nothing which is irrational or unbelievable about Jesus here on earth, being

both wholly God and wholly man, praying into the totality of God and using the earthly analogy of a son praying to a father.

If we then turn from thinking about what Jesus was doing to what he was asking in the prayer. He starts by recognising that the time has come and asking the Father to glorify him that he may glorify the Father. Jesus here clearly means something other than the glory which has already come to him through the people whom God has given him and he refers to in verse 10. Its prominence in the prayer indicates that it is even more special than the coming of the glory of the Lord which the people of Israel saw coming onto Mt Sinai and certainly more than the earthly glory of Solomon which Jesus mentioned when comparing it to the lilies of the field. He is asking God to do something special for him in the same way that he has done for the Father. But what?

Glorify in this context, I think, can only mean the transformation into something more magnificent - like the colourful butterfly emerging from the dull chrysalis. This would tie in with the famous phrase in the first chapter of the gospel "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth". Here Jesus is praying that by means of the cross, the resurrection and ascension something which has been hidden to the world which be made plain.

What is it that is to be made plain? Jesus goes on to explain that the Father has granted him authority over all flesh, sovereignty over the world. It is not yet plain - he is still Jesus the teacher whom his followers hope is the messiah who will restore the kingdom of Israel. Through what is to come, Jesus will be seen as far, far more. We recall how Paul expressed it to the Philippians that God the Father "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father". This is the glorification which Jesus prays to the Father.

But how does Jesus glorify the Father? In many ways but most relevant here through his life, his death and his resurrection he shows God to be more than just the god of the Jews, he shows God to be the Lord and Father the creator and sustainer of the universe through his love, in a way to which all people, everywhere and at every time, can respond.

And Jesus goes on to build upon this in the prayer by saying that he has been given authority over all people that he might give eternal life to those whom the Father had given him. He says that eternal life comes from knowing the one God and Jesus as the messiah. Eternal life is not something which they and we may have in the future: it is not a length of time, an eternity but it is rather a quality of life which we may enjoy now by knowing God. It builds upon Jesus's explanation of the purpose of his being, which John records in the 10th chapter, of how he has come that his followers may have life and have it more abundantly. For us it is God's will that through knowing him and Jesus we should have a quality in our lives which itself shows the glory of God.

Having brought the totality of his life and purpose before his Father as a whole, a whole which will shortly be completed, Jesus then prays that he may be glorified in his Father's presence with the same glory that he had before the world was created.

But the prayer does not end there. Jesus prays for those whom the Father has drawn 'out of the world' and given him. It is noticeable that he is not praying for the world or for its rulers or even for its peace but at this time, this special time, he is praying for the disciples - the followers whom the Father has given him.

These people are special and they are precious because they are people who know that everything which Jesus has given them, has taught them, has seen grow in them has come through

Jesus from the Father. They are disciples who have accepted what Jesus has given them, they have believed that he was sent by the Father and they have obeyed his word. They are indeed special.

He speaks of them as being special in another way too for he says “and glory has come to me through them”. He doesn’t say that they have glorified him since that is what he is praying the Father for but rather that they have been central to God showing his glory to the world in Jesus.

Then Jesus prays that as he leaves them in the world, they may be protected by the power of the Father’s name. It is an interesting phrase. In these days we tend to think of a name as just a designation but its significance to the followers of Jesus was much more than a mere title; the name was the presence of the person. You will remember how the name of God in the old testament was written in Hebrew as *yod he waw he* (JHVH) but was so holy that it was never spoken except in very special circumstances, God was referred to by descriptive titles such as ‘the Lord’. There was power and presence in the very name and it is this power by which Jesus asks the Father to protect his disciples so that they may be one just as he and the Father are one.

Although here he is praying for his little flock, later in this prayer he prays in the same way for all believers, that they too may be one and that “they may be in us” (verse 21). And thus Jesus is praying also for each and every one of us that we may hold together with each other and with God.

And so, although this *is* a prayer, it is much more than just a prayer for in it Jesus reveals important things about himself and about us.

First, it shows Jesus as being one with the Father. We are not yet at the doctrine of the Trinity and Andy’s Mars Bar analogy,

for those who were here last week, but reading this prayer we cannot doubt that Jesus knew himself to be one with the Father, possessed of the glory of God since before the world began.

Second, it shows that knowing God the Father and Jesus the Christ can give us a quality of life which can only be described as eternal life - and this is something which Jesus's disciples down the ages have recognised and experienced. We do not follow Jesus because of reaching an intellectual conclusion, important though that may be, but because we have seen and experienced a quality in life which comes from knowing him.

Third, it shows that we too have our part to play in showing Jesus glory to the world and that we need not fear to do so because we are protected by the power of God's name.

And all that in eleven short verses.

Amen