

Sermon on Sunday 24 May 2020

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Reading: John 17. 11: "Holy Father, protect them."

A prayer in time of crisis. A prayer for our time.

On the Sunday before Pentecost, the lectionary takes us back one last time to the Upper Room, to the Last Supper, to a time of profound crisis for Jesus. After teaching and reassuring his followers, before he goes out to face arrest and death, Jesus turns in prayer to his Father. 'Protect them'.

The value of life, and our duty to shield the vulnerable from every danger, have come sharply into focus in these days. The prayer 'protect them' is daily on our lips.

The scholars tell us that John wrote his Gospel at a time and place of intense persecution of Christians. Another time of crisis. Perhaps that explains the strong distinction Jesus makes in his prayer between 'the World' and those who are 'His', those the Father has given to him.

It is so natural for us to pray most earnestly for those we think of as our own. As we mourn as a congregation the death of Avilé Grey, of Joan Beagles, of Sheila Place, of Arthur Haynes, and others close to us, it is also natural to ask how, or even if, our prayers have been heard. How does God protect his own?

Can we claim His protection more than anyone else? Who are 'His own'? Down the ages, we've been disappointingly creative in marking out the boundaries.

We may look to ethics – to behaviour. To the virtues of humility, honesty, generosity, and self-control. Who is 'good' enough to qualify for His protection?

We may look to patterns of piety for your answer – the habits of prayer and study, or worship and sacraments. Who is 'spiritual' enough to earn His protection?

Or we may venture into the thorny world of creeds and doctrines – do we believe the right things? Of heaven and hell, of grace and resurrection, of divinity and Trinity, of virgin births and incarnation. Who is orthodox enough to earn His protection?

I know very many of us have moved on from questions like that. God never asked us to decide who can and can't be counted as one of His own and He will happily set us free from the self-imposed burden of deciding. He never meant it to be our job.

I think God only asks one question. Who is vulnerable enough to need my protection? And the answer is everyone, even those who do not realise it for themselves.

But that protection does not mean that our lives will be shielded from death, grief and suffering more than anyone else's. Our Father's protection has a very different quality.

For in our Gospel earlier we also hear these words of Jesus: 'This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.

Knowing him. God, the Father, revealed to us most fully through Jesus. Not knowing about him, but knowing Him. Not just walking dutifully in the paths he directs us in, but walking at His side. Not just talking about Him, but talking with Him.

By knowing God, we do not become better people than everyone else (though I hope we all try to be as good as we can be); we don't become cleverer than everyone else (though we're not ashamed of trying to learn); we don't get access to secret truths or mystical powers. We certainly don't think that God cares more about us than he does about anyone else.

We are just the fortunate ones who are already learning that life is better when we listen to Him. People who know that we cannot be the people we are meant to be without his help. And people who believe that in Jesus, God reaches out his hand to us, and gives us the wisdom and strength to live as his children. Not just telling us what to do, but, first and more than anything else, telling us He loves us. Christians are simply the people who know how much He loves His world. And the people who know how much that love costs Him.

Our Father protects us by keeping our knowledge of His love in our hearts. By knowing us and allowing us to know Him.



And knowing Him, Jesus tells us, is eternal life. As Alan reminded us last Sunday, 'eternal life' is not tomorrow's reward for passing the exam of mortal life. The ancient Greek words of John's original text bear so many richer and more immediate meanings. Life without boundaries. Life without limits. Life without bookends of time or

space or possibility. The life of the new age, life wholly made new. A full life. A whole life's worth of life.

Holy Father, protect that life in all your children. Protect that life in all your Creation.