

NR SERMON 17<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, I John 5:9-13, John 17: 6-9

### **“Greatest Prayer Ever Prayed”**

The gospels frequently tell us that Jesus prayed, but they hardly ever tell us what He prayed or how He prayed, but this morning’s gospel reading is one of those exceptions, for what we heard is Jesus at prayer on the night before his crucifixion. Because of its content, it is regarded as the ‘The Greatest Prayer Ever Prayed’.

The first section of the prayer, that precedes what we have heard this morning, is a celebration and a request. The two are closely linked. Jesus is celebrating the fact that his work is done. Save for the huge and awful task that awaited him the next day, He has completed the deeds and works that the Father gave him to do and He has laid before his disciples all that the Father has given to him. That is the reason for the celebration, and it is the ground of the request he makes.

His request is that he may now be exalted, glorified and lifted up to that position alongside the Father which, in Jewish tradition, the Messiah was supposed to attain. This last Thursday, at a wonderful Service at 8am in the Rectory Garden, we celebrated Jesus’ ascension into heaven, forty days after the resurrection. The psalms tell us that when the Messiah takes his seat at the throne of God, He will have universal dominion and the “age to come” will truly have begun. This life of the ‘coming age’ is what we refer to as ‘eternal life’.

St John wrote in his epistle ‘God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.’ We can never earn ourselves a place in heaven – that is in the free gift of God, by his grace, and God offers heaven to all who are willing to accept it, but ‘eternal ‘life’ is not just something that people can have after their death. It isn’t simply that in some future state, the world will go on for ever and ever and we shall be part of it. Rather, once Jesus has completed the final victory over death itself, all his followers, all who trust him and believe that he has truly come from the Father, all of them can, and will, possess ‘eternal life’, right here and now.

In the sections of the prayer that we have heard this morning, we see the extraordinarily close and trusting relationship between Jesus and the Father,

but the prayer, which is three petitions, for security, protection and sanctification, is not intended to be exclusive; we are invited to join in.

Jesus, knowing that he is going away, prays on behalf of his disciples that He will soon be leaving behind on earth. During his time here He has kept his flock of disciples together, as one, and He prays that with the protection of his name, they may continue to be as one, for he is concerned that, with his imminent departure, that unity will be lost and the disciples will scatter.

He is entrusting them to the Father he has known and loved throughout his own earthly life; the Father who, he knows, will care for them every bit as much as he has cared for him. He is very much aware that the disciples are at risk. The world, which hates them as it hated him, will threaten and abuse them. They don't belong to it, but they are to be sent into it, and they need protecting. That's what the prayer is about.

When Jesus said that his followers were not of this world, he meant that they were distinct from this world in so far as they have become cleansed through his call and teaching; they are no longer part of the world that has rebelled against God. Jesus, knowing that with his departure Satan would shift his efforts from him to his disciples, prays that they now don't get pulled back into that dark world of wickedness and rebellion; He is entrusting their safe keeping to the Father who will continue to look after them, in the way that He did during his public ministry - like the shepherd does his sheep and where not one was lost, except the one destined in scripture – a sorrowful reference to Judas Iscariot.

Jesus does not ask his Father to remove the followers from the world of evil and rebellion, but asks for their protection because their presence in the world will bless it, much as referred to in Philippians 2:15 "that they may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world."

The third petition is that the disciples, who are now being sent out into the world, may be set apart for a holy purpose and Jesus even mentions that the instrument or means of sanctification is the "Word of God" – the truth. It is through sanctification by the Word that the other parts of his petition would be realised:

The Word would keep them united in Christ, and the Word would keep them from the evil one, just as it did for Jesus when He was tempted by Satan.

I said earlier that Jesus did not intend this prayer to be exclusive, we are all invited to join in, for we are followers of Jesus, who trust Him and believe that He truly came from the Father, just as those first disciples did. Jesus has the same concerns for us today;

- Concern that we be kept in unity, for Jesus prayed “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me... that they may all be as one”.
- Concern that we be kept from the evil one
- Concern that we be sanctified through the Word of God, for He wants us to be His holy people in the best and fullest sense.

It is the content and the object of care that makes this the ‘The Greatest Prayer Ever Prayed’ and with some slight variation it can be used by Christians, for themselves. Where the prayer says “I” substitute “Jesus”, and replace “they” and “them” with “I” and “me”, and you’ll get the idea. You have the bible reference in your Service Sheet; during this coming week, you might just try doing that, but be careful. This is a serious prayer. It is one of the most serious things Jesus ever said. That’s why, deep down, it is among the most joyful and hopeful. Pray it with awe and with delight.

Amen.