

Sermon - 16th May 2021 - 7th Sunday of Easter - John 17:6-19

Jesus prays for his disciples – Revd Carol Harley

May my words be true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the Last Supper Jesus is aware that his hour has come and he is about to be arrested and put to death. He takes the opportunity of his final meal with the disciples to teach them about the events that will take place after his death. As well as preparing his disciples for his departure to God, he gives them guidance for their own mission in the world.

Today's Gospel is part of Jesus' prayer before the crucifixion. The disciples are those whom God has given to Jesus, and he asks the Father to protect them from the evil one: "Holy Father", he prays, "protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me".

Jesus is praying for the disciples, but it is also a prayer for all of us who come after. We too are to be protected by God from all the evil that could come to us. We too will be saved from destruction.

But how can this be?

Despite this prayer, tragedy strikes. Accidents happen. In a flash our lives can be devastated.

Who amongst us this morning could have even dreamt that at the beginning of last year we would be plunged into the grips of a world-wide pandemic known as COVID-19. At present this virus has killed millions of people globally, and it still continues to do its deadly work throughout the world. India, at this time, is battling to turn the tide on the havoc and death toll it is wreaking amongst their people.

So what exactly is this protection John the Evangelist is talking about? And what does it protect us from? Protection for the disciples certainly wasn't uppermost in Luke's mind when he had Jesus telling the seventy disciples, "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). They were to carry no weapons for their safety, no money, no food, no sandals, only one cloak. No purse or pack. Travel was to be barefoot.

Yet we have Jesus praying that God will protect his disciples from evil, keep them together, and save them from destruction.

How can this be?

If this is protection, it's an odd sort of protection. It seems to protect us from nothing. For an answer, perhaps we need to think differently. It's tempting for us to think of God's protection where he intervenes directly and prevents us coming to any harm.

- God will protect me by intervening to prevent tragedy, illness, or trouble.
- God will protect me by ensuring nothing happens that would cause me or my loved ones any sadness or distress.

- God will intervene to stop disaster occurring, and to make sure only good things happen.

But this can't be the way it works.

This sort of protection could only be the protection of an unpredictable God, sometimes granting our requests, sometimes not. Saving some, and not others. Preventing some deadly viruses from killing millions of people, yet allowing others to go unchecked.

But if this is not what is meant by God's protection, what is?

Can it be something implanted within us?

In this season of Easter, we celebrate the risen Christ and Christians have always believed that the risen Christ is not only identified with the risen Jesus over two thousand years ago. We believe the resurrection all those years ago has become a present reality within us. The transforming power of the resurrection isn't something that exists only in the past. It's not a one-off event in which our response is simply to believe or be broken.

The resurrection is at work within us now – individually and corporately. And it takes place in us as a recognition and loving response to God's intention in the creation of the world.

Can we say, then, that this recognition of God's love and experience of his love is the reality of the resurrection at work in us, transforming us?

The force of the resurrection for us concerns our active involvement in recognising and using his risen presence within us, and it's this risen presence at work in us which is the protection of which John the Evangelist speaks.

The world we live in is not controlled by God's protection. Our protection isn't to be found in God manipulating the events and circumstances which might come along to cause us hurt, pain and sadness. Our protection is the risen Christ within us.

So even though God won't intervene to prevent suffering or tragedy or death, or even stop the COVID pandemic in its tracks, his presence within us is protection enough to be sure that even the worst circumstances which we have to deal with will never destroy the value and meaning of our lives, nor will they affect our capacity to love and to receive love.

As disciples of Christ we are to go into the world with his gospel of love, to be peacemakers in a time of disharmony, to be lovemakers in a time of hate, to be hopemakers in a time of despair. And the living Christ comes with us, surrounding us with his prayer that we might be protected from evil.

We pray: To God, who plants in us the protection of his risen and glorified Son, be all praise, honour and thanksgiving, now and forever. Amen.