**Jesus prays for his disciples John 17:6-19**

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn’t. ‘What makes you think you can walk right over here and take over?’ asks Linus. ‘These five fingers,’ says Lucy. ‘Individually they’re nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single until, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold’. ‘Which channel do you want?’ asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, ‘Why can’t you guys get organised like that?’

In our gospel reading for today Jesus prays for his disciples, that they might be one just as he and the Father are one. This is famously known as Jesus’s high priestly prayer as he prepares for his imminent death. In the 5 verses before our passage Jesus has prayed for himself; that the Father will glorify him as he finishes the work which has been given to him. Now he turns his attention to his disciples. The implication is clear. The disciples are the tangible expression of the completion of his work. He has come to sanctify himself, but the end result of this is ‘*that they too may be truly sanctified*’ (19). Amazingly the great rescue story of God focuses in on that little company in the upper room in Jerusalem on Passover evening, as they are about to forsake and deny their Master and scatter like panicking sheep.

The prayer of Jesus for the disciples has two parts. In the first part he redefines the disciples who are the subjects of his prayer (6-10); and, secondly, he prays several petitions on their behalf.

***The subjects of Jesus’s prayer (6-10)***

The first few verses tell us that the disciples have been the possession of the Father – *they were yours* (6), but have been given by the Father to the Son – *those whom you gave me* (6), *those whom you have given me* (9). In v.10 the ownership is reciprocal between Father and Son: ‘*All I have is yours, and all you have is mine*’. The practical implication of this is significant – because they have been claimed by God they are utterly secure. This is very much to the point since Jesus is about to unveil the powerful and malignant spiritual foe who seeks their harm.

Verses 7-8 describe the disciples’ knowledge. *They know that everything you have given me comes from you* (7). Despite the many limitations of their understanding the disciples have grasped the fundamental truth that Jesus can be explained only in terms of the Father. *They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me* (8). It is to be noted that their certainty about Jesus came through accepting his words (8).

***The concerns of Jesus’s prayer (11-19)***

Jesus’s relationship to these men is about to change in a fundamental way. *I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world* (11). The departure of Jesus is a crisis for the disciples, prompting Jesus’s prayer. In this time of his ‘absence’ Jesus prays 4 things for them.

1. Jesus prays that they may be protected (11-12, 15). This is necessary because they face two formidable foes. The first is the world, which has hated them. The world’s antagonism towards Jesus and his disciples derives from the fact that they are different; they are not of this world.

The second foe is the devil (15). Jesus states his conquest of the devil at several points in these chapters, but he is never in danger of dismissing this opposition as merely nominal. The case of Judas (12), who had turned aside to do the will of the devil from within the intimate disciple company, was sobering evidence of the impressiveness of Satan’s power. The case of Judas made it clear that the disciples were facing a genuine conflict. Peter, who learned from Jesus, was later to speak of the devil as a ‘roaring lion’ (1 Pet 5:8).

The world and the devil are still very much daunting enemies today and Jesus’s concern about them in his prayer is a summons to vigilance and prayer for protection. One commentator pointedly observes: ‘The spiritual dimensions of this prayer of Jesus are consistent and overwhelming. By contrast we spend much of our time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one’.

How then are the disciples to survive? By the power of God’s name (11-12). God’s name is basically his revealed character. In the OT, God represents himself to the people of Israel under a variety of names, each of which teaches something important about who he is. Jesus has brought the disciples a whole new understanding of God. That revelation of God will now keep them. As they remain loyal to the truth that Jesus has shared with them, and allow it to remain in their minds and shape their conduct, they will ‘*continue in his name and be protected from all the attacks of the world and the devil* (11). The writer or Proverbs says ‘The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe’ (18:10)

1. Jesus prays that they may be united (11). The result of the disciples remaining ‘*in the name’* is their experiencing the unity which Jesus prays for them. Their unity itself will be a victory over the devil, since part of his strategy will be to attack it. It will also be part of their armoury against him, since their fellowship will be an expression of the power of God’s name which protects them. This unity will be patterned after the unity of the Father and the Son.
2. Jesus prays that they may be *delighted* (13). Despite the formidable foes which will confront them, the disciple community can experience the very joy of X, and Jesus prays that they will. It is surely remarkable that Jesus can refer to his own ‘joy’ when he knows that the most appalling suffering is about to engulf him. What is more, it is the *full measure* of his joy (13).
3. Jesus prays that they may be *dedicated* (17-19). Although the world is a threatening place for the disciples, Jesus does not want them removed from it (15). A major reason why they are to remain in the world is because he has a purpose for them there (18). *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world* (18).

The importance of the mission of the disciples cannot be overstated. Jesus is to depart from the world; the disciples are to go into the world. It is not that the disciples now replace Jesus; no, his mission is at work through them and by extension through us. Being sent meant for Jesus his utter dedication to the claim and call of the Father. The disciples’ commission can mean nothing less.

SO WHAT?

As we emerge from lockdown, I suggest that we have a unique opportunity to rediscover and rebuild what it looks like for our Christian communities to inhabit the mission of the Father. We have an opportunity to reconfigure the way we do mission and ministry after this time of enforced exile. Sure, somethings will continue as before, but other things will need to stop or at least be changed if we are to engage effectively in God’s mission in the season ahead.

As we prayerfully consider together what this re-building looks like, we need to ensure that we preserve our unity in Christ. There is nothing worse than a church that is divided and without a common vision to pray into and serve out of. We need to listen carefully to each other’s different opinions and suggestions, but we need to preserve our unity together in Christ, just as Jesus prays for us in this passage. We need to pray for our protection from the disorder and destruction of the one who is the ‘roaring lion’. We need to intentionally serve one another and go out of our way to bless those whom we disagree with to preserve unity and to experience the joy that Jesus has won for us on the cross. There is much to celebrate as we emerge from lockdown and there is much to focus on as we prepare to live for Jesus in every aspect of our lives in this new season.

As I finish may I leave you with a few questions to prayerfully reflect on?

* How do you express Christian unity in your life?
* Do you pray for God’s protection from the evil one?
* How does your life express the full measure of Christ’s joy?
* How are you showing in your walk with Jesus that you are set apart for the gospel of God?