

## **General Assembly Sermon**

### **St Giles Cathedral**

**17th May 2015**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; John 17:6-19**

Today's chosen reading is from one of the most remarkable chapters in the whole New Testament – a chapter often referred to as the high priestly prayer of Jesus. In a striking and deeply moving way it brings to a climax John's account of the last meal Jesus took with his disciples prior to his Passion. Indeed, in John's narrative, this prayer is presented as the final thing done by Jesus before his betrayal and arrest in Gethsemane. It is a prayer offered to his Father on behalf of all those who, in the prayer's terms, were given to him as a gift by the Father. Jesus prays in the knowledge of what is about to happen to him, and he trusts that soon he will return to the Father by the route of death, resurrection and the glorious ascension we are specially remembering today. His thoughts, however, are dominated not so much by personal issues as by his deep concern both for those who had become his followers during his ministry, and all who would in the future become his followers. Their deepest interests weigh heavily on his spirit.

Many of us – maybe I'm showing my vintage - have greatly enjoyed the film 'Home Alone' with its, on the face of it, highly unlikely story-line in which an 8-year old American boy is left behind when his family go to France for a holiday, leaving the youngster to fend for himself. The high jinks that follow are quite hilarious. It's a fact, however, that while many entirely responsible and caring parents in certain circumstances find it necessary to be separated from their children for a while, their over-riding concern at such a time is to ensure that their children are in the care of those who will look after them well, keep them happy, and give priority to their safety.

We see something like this going on here. The soon-to-depart Jesus asks his Father to look after the followers he is having to leave behind. And we quickly realise that he is praying not only for the protection and consecration of his immediate followers but for all who would come to follow him in years and ages to come. Here's one great thought to hold on to today and in the week that lies ahead - for some of us find it impossible to look any further than next Friday. Jesus is praying for us! Many of us know the encouragement of being assured in a time of difficulty, maybe of ill-health, that friends are praying for us. To know that our crucified, risen and ascended Lord undergirds with his

ongoing prayer not only our individual lives as his followers but every aspect of the corporate life of the church should give joy to our hearts indeed. Yes, Jesus is praying for us.

And yet there is something in the prayer that has often caused puzzlement and possibly even scandal. That is the strong distinction that runs through the prayer between Jesus' followers and what he calls the 'world'. To his Father he says, 'I am asking on their behalf, I am not asking on behalf of the world.' We immediately recall that a mere few chapters back, in the Bible's most famous verse, we are explicitly told that Jesus' very coming to us was out of God's pure love for the *world*. And now we have him drawing this strange line of demarcation. He is praying for his followers; he is not praying for the world. Why not? The answer to that question will lead us to the heart of the prayer – and to the heart of Jesus himself for us and for his church today.

We begin by recognising that for John this word 'world' often carries a very particular meaning – not the physical world, or the world of humanity as such - but 'world' in the sense of a system or sphere marked by hostility to God, marked by disorder, disunity, by values that stand in opposition to God's own values. It's the sphere where the 'evil one' of v. 15 presides, where particular and inevitably transient parts of the created order are worshipped instead of the Creator himself, whether Mammon or Mars, Aphrodite or Gaia, or any other of the plurality of gods, leading to choices that inevitably issue only in decay and death. From the 'world' in that sense Jesus says his followers have been rescued. It was from this 'world' that the Father gave them to Jesus. Their truest identity is now found in their belonging to Jesus himself and in him to one another in the community of faith. And the evidence is rather clear that for all the excessive individualism of our age, belonging is that for which the human heart still cries out. As Richard Bauckham has said, 'We were not made for freedom from belonging, but for freedom in belonging.'

So in relation to this distinction, for what does Jesus pray on his followers' behalf during the unique interim in which he has returned to the Father and left his followers in the world? He requests two particular things. The first is their protection. 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one' (v. 11). During his time with them Jesus himself protected his disciples and kept them safe. Now he prays that the Father will keep them in loyal allegiance to all that he has graciously revealed of himself in the Son, keeping them aligned with God's word as faithful followers of the Word incarnate.

This thought of the danger posed by the world to followers of Jesus has a curiously contemporary ring. It has been estimated that more Christians were martyred for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all the previous nineteen combined. And now, a decade and a half into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can see that one of the most ominous developments in these recent years has been the global rise of religious persecution and the decline of religious liberty. This has been manifested most violently in the Middle East, in South and East Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa. The suffering has been on an unimaginable scale. Religious freedom is arguably under increasing pressure also in the West. In our own country there has been a concerted move to have the voice of faith completely silenced in the public square, and a strange amnesia about the Christian inspiration and motivation underlying many of our most cherished national institutions, services and values.

It might be tempting, therefore, for Christians, for the church, simply to withdraw within the imagined security of our own established enclaves. Jesus, however, does not give us that option. Jesus prays that his people will be kept from evil. He does not, however, pray to the Father to take them out of the world.

What then does he pray for (besides their protection)? Here, secondly, is where the whole direction of the prayer has been taking us. He prays that his followers may be sanctified or consecrated. Against its Old Testament background the idea is that of being set apart for sacred tasks and responsibilities, set apart for God's purposes in the world. What that means, in the words of the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, is that the church exists for mission as fire by burning. Jesus' mission of salvation was coming to its climax in his death and resurrection. Here is the faithful servant of Isaiah's prophecy, set apart to be a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness' (Isaiah 42:6-7).

In God's plan his great 'new creation' achievement was to be implemented by his followers in the power of the Holy Spirit. For this tremendous task he prays that they, that we, be set apart. 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' (v.18). This reciprocity between what the Father does and what Jesus does is at last what explains the apparent exclusivity of Jesus' prayer. In the most profound sense, it is for the sake of the world that he prays for the sanctification of his followers, because the church, in all its weakness and unworthiness, is God's chosen instrument for the blessing of the nations. It is truly remarkable that on the eve of the cross it is the worldwide mission of his

followers that dominates Jesus' thinking. Ours is the high calling to 'imitate the incarnation', becoming Jesus' hands and feet, mouth and ears in a world that desperately needs to know the love of the God who sent to us his own Son. Let us ever remember that our prime task is to bring people to know and follow Jesus. 'Go, and make disciples of all nations,' said our Lord.

We do well to ponder afresh the weighty responsibility laid upon us of continuing in our time and place the mission of Jesus. In William Storrar's prophetic and challenging words, we have been called to 'rethink our Christian identity as the community of those who confess Jesus as Lord, with a distinctive life from the rest of the secular community and yet with an overriding sense of responsibility for the nation in mission, social criticism and service'.

'In the world' in loving, incarnational service, but 'not of the world' in the distinctiveness which the community of Jesus' followers is bound to embody, because this is itself integral to the service which we are called to render.

Ours is indeed a high calling, and with Paul we may well exclaim, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' In these charged and challenging times, how marvellous it is to recall that Jesus is praying for us still, and for our unity in mission. May we all be caught up into the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, humbly asking that we might ourselves be part of the answer to His prayer, and that the troubled and broken world which it is our privilege to serve for Christ's sake will be able to discern in us the reconciling power and love of God, and so in turn come to know and love and serve our Lord, as he continues to make all things new. To which end we pray, '*Veni, Creator Spiritus!* Come, Creator Spirit!' To whom, with the Father and the Son be all praise, honour and glory both now and evermore. Amen