

**Sermon preached at Soham on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2017 - Easter 7**  
**Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11**

There's something special about the reading we've just heard. It comes from a much longer passage in which Jesus teaches His disciples and then prays for them. He teaches them about who He is and what it means to follow Him. He teaches them about the help that's available as they follow. He teaches them about the difficulties they will face, and the joy and peace that they will experience as they follow Him. Then He goes on to pray for them. The beginning of that prayer is what we have just heard. A few verses later He extends that prayer to include all those who will believe – and that includes us. He prays for them and us: praying that God will be glorified and that they and we will be protected and made holy so that we may be one, so that the rest of the world will know that God loves them.

There is a sense here of rounding things off, of things coming to completion. Jesus has made God known, demonstrating His love, living and teaching what it means to live as God's people in the world. Having done what He's come to do, all that remains is for it to be finished off by His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, so that He can be glorified, recognised as Who He actually is, recognised as God and King, confirming to His disciples what they have believed about Him. This is what He prays for here, when He says "glorify Your Son so that the Son may glorify You".

In our first reading this morning we heard what came after this: Jesus was glorified. Having been killed, He was resurrected; and having spent some weeks with His disciples teaching them further He promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, through Whom they will receive power and will be His witnesses. And then He is taken up into heaven in a cloud, the sign of God's presence. Now there can be no doubt about Who He is. Now He has been glorified, lifted up to His proper position. We sing of that exaltation in our hymns this morning. For the most part we focus on the earthly life of Jesus, but this is a reminder that that's only a part of the story. He is also crowned Lord of all.

I wonder what difference it makes if we focus on Jesus risen and ascended, King and Ruler. I wonder how our perception of Him, and us, changes.

In one sense, in the sense of linear time, we come after all of this: after the cross, resurrection and ascension; after the coming of the Holy Spirit; after people have been witnesses and the gospel has been spread widely, if not yet to the ends of the earth. But there is another sense in which we're not quite there yet. We are the latest of the future generations of believers for whom Jesus prayed. And although Jesus has been glorified, that is not yet complete in that we still await His return as King. And so, like His disciples and all those since, we are in an in-between place in which we live out the Kingdom despite its sometimes apparent absence.

In that context, then, how powerful is the prayer which Jesus prayed for us: "Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one." He had done what He came to do; He was looking forward to the final steps, of His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. He was aware that He was going to be leaving them without His physical presence, and that presented – and still does – the danger of being pulled back into their previous life. How easy is it to stop being different, to blend in, to live good lives like the majority of those around us but not live God's life, the life of God's people in the world. You can hear Jesus' compassion as He prays, recognising that He is leaving them, "Holy Father, protect them...so that they may be one." He entrusts them – and us – to God, with the desire that they – and us – will be one, with the result that the world will see that this must be of God, and that the world may believe.

Holy Father, protect them, so that they may be one.

We have a part to play in the answering of that prayer. It's not about doing what we like and still being protected. To use the analogy of a carer and a child: if the child wanders away from the carer and does its own thing, the carer cannot protect it. To be protected by God we need to stay close to God.

That staying close happens through prayer. From last Thursday and through this coming week we have our Focus on Prayer here in Soham, as part of Thy Kingdom Come, the global focus on prayer. There are resources available, and opportunities to join together here in church for daily prayer. But it doesn't stop after this week. Prayer keeps us close to the Father. Individual prayer. And corporate prayer. Being part of the body enables us to help each other to stay close to God. And we have the promised Holy Spirit to live with us and in us, to assist in that staying close.

I wonder what steps we take, individually and together, to ensure that we stay close to God.

Being protected is also not about nothing bad ever happening. That isn't the nature of the world we live in. The prayer is "Protect them so that they may be one". It is about protection from disunity, not from all the bad stuff in the world. And there's a reason for it – that by our one-ness we will stand out as different in such a way that it points to God, and by that the world may believe in Him.

Protect them, so that they may be one. So what, I wonder, might that one-ness look like? How can we, with the help of the Holy Spirit, become the answer to that prayer?

I suspect that the answer lies in learning to see each other, and ourselves, as God sees us. That is, to see each other and ourselves as loved human beings made in the image of the God Who loves us, loved human beings for whom Christ died, and in Whom the Spirit dwells. Loved human beings who, by our sin, have wounded others, both individuals and the Body, and have wounded ourselves. Loved human beings who are in need of healing.

Look around at each other: each one of us here this morning is a loved human being who is made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, in whom the Spirit dwells, and who by our sin has wounded ourselves, wounded other individuals, and wounded the Body of Christ – and who, therefore, needs healing from those wounds. And that's not just the people in here this morning. When you leave here and go to get on with whatever you do for the rest of your week, all the people with whom you come into contact are also loved people who are made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, in whom the Spirit dwells, and who have wounded themselves and each other and are in need of healing. As we have prayed this week, and continue to pray, for the people of Manchester, each person who died and each member of each family and each person who has been affected in any way, those who have been arrested in connection with the attack and the perpetrator of the attack, all are people made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, in whom the Spirit dwelt, and who have wounded themselves and others and are in need of healing.

How, I wonder, can we learn to see each other and ourselves as God see us.

Jesus did what He came to do: He made God known. And He has been glorified, returned to His rightful place, confirmed as God and King. But we are not left alone. In place of His physical presence we have the gift of His Holy Spirit with us and in us. And we have His prayer for us: Holy Father, protect them so that they may be one. And in that gift and that prayer we can know ourselves loved and can take the risk of loving others... that the world may believe.