

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people,³ to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.⁶ 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

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It is just one week until Pentecost – the birthday of the Church – the coming of God's Spirit. We remember his promise that we will never be alone, that he will send a helper, a comfort, a protector. And in the gospel reading we just heard, Jesus re-iterates this plea to his Father, asking God to protect all those he is going to be leaving behind. He says, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Protect them. May they be one as we are one."

It's a reading that recognises that the world is not all it should be – not even all it could be. Then, just as now, faith does not make God's people immune to suffering, to anxiety or to grief. The seeming randomness of a virus that can change everything, leads us to echo Jesus' prayer for protection, trusting and believing that he is always with us. But at the same time, we recognise that Christians have not got a magic wand that makes everything alright for us – neither should we have, if we take seriously the injunction to live in the world with courage and love. We pray, we grieve, we hope, and we try not to become so anxious or so fuelled by fear that we forget to love our neighbour.

And we learn to look for God in all kinds of places. Nothing can stop light, goodness and love breaking through. We have grown in our appreciation of the natural world. We have learnt to be grateful for the food we have and to be a little less fussy. We have discovered that our neighbours really do care for us. We have found that even when we have to stay in our homes we can make a difference to our communities. We have discovered new ways of showing love, because ultimately, whatever the circumstances, love is the most important thing there is to human beings.

It is important that this passage where Jesus is perfectly honest with his Father about the struggles of this world also includes him talking about “eternal life”. And because this is so often misunderstood, I would like to just say a little about it. So let me be clear. Jesus is NOT saying that eternal life is a prize that we win when we get to heaven from believing the right things. Listen carefully, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Eternal life is what we experience when we know God, when we trust him, when we believe his promises, when we engage with him and his priorities. Eternal life, or life in all its fulness as it is sometimes expressed, is available right now. Eternal life is not so much about length of time (since God is outside time anyway) – it is about a quality of life, a state of mind – a choice to live with God – yes, in the next world, but also, crucially, in this world too. Eternity starts now, and it is a choice (by God’s Spirit and with our own will) that we make again and again, every moment of our lives.

It turns out that we can have life in all its fulness even in lockdown, if we trust in God and know how to both give and receive love from our neighbour. What an enormous challenge! And yet it is true. Christians have found down the ages that their lives have been worth living, in freedom and captivity, in suffering and in celebration, and in all times of uncertainty – in fact, it is perhaps in times of uncertainty that we come to trust in his promises more fully.

And so, as we wait for Pentecost, in the full acknowledgement of the complexity and suffering of this world, we do a strange and beautiful thing today. We proclaim – because we know it to be true – that life in all its fulness is open to us right now – and that love is stronger than anything. Love wins.