

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, 2020

Jesus as ascended back to his rightful place at the right hand side of God, and as the season of Easter reaches its climax and we wait in an atmosphere of prayer and praise with those first disciples for the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And while we wait, we hear from Jesus on this Seventh Sunday of Easter words which have been called the high priestly prayer that reflect how far we have come over these past weeks, which can also be understood as how far we have travelled in our Christian journey from the time of our hearing those words of Jesus “follow me”, and how we best maintain and continue to grow towards that goal, that is eternal union with God.

So let us begin the goal; “let him give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him.” This is the destiny of all those who live their lives looking and living in the light of the Saviour. Jesus says it very plainly, “And eternal life is this, to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Over these past weeks of Easter we have seen the truth of God in the actions and mission of Jesus. In his life he brought the joys of the Kingdom into the hearts of people by elevating them to their proper worth, whether that was restoring them to community living through healing or forgiveness, calling them by name, sharing the life of God with them through his presence. And through his passion, cross, resurrection and ascension, Jesus has shown that all life is invited to share with him in determining meaning in and through suffering, that to be lifted up into heaven is first to be lifted up on to a cross and that our flesh free from the contaminants of sin is taken into Heaven by the humanity of Jesus.

To lose sight of this goal is to descend into a despair that fails to see that there is hope in every death. We have seen a lot of death since we started out on our Easter journey this year. I am not talking about grief, this is a normal part of seeking that love when the object of love can no longer be grasped in the familiar ways that make relationships unique, for as St Paul says we don't grieve as those who have no hope; I am talking about the seemingly senseless end of lives that had so much to live for. Life in Christ, does not end with the grave, it begins more fully from the grave. It begins with knowing God in Jesus here and now, and at death being fully known by God in Jesus who sits at the right of God's throne.

Which leads onto the words of Jesus; “I have made your name known..... Now at last they know that all you have given me comes indeed from you, for I have given them the teaching you gave to me... Our experience as Christians working our way toward the goal of eternity is always walking ever closer with Jesus, knowing Jesus. This is not to be mixed up with knowing *about* Jesus. There are whole departments of theology and spirituality in colleges and universities that can tell you all about Jesus. Academic papers are written, dissertations are published, books are read in their thousands all about Jesus; his life, his times, his teachings, and so on. And these same people can be mostly indifferent to faith than the best secularist or atheist. Contrast the study of theology between East and West. In the West an atheist can study Theology as an academic subject, but in the East the true study of Theology can only happen through the gateway of prayer. Our faith only grows with knowing Jesus, not just knowing about him. Bishop Michael Ramsey always said, “it is not how clever we can speak of Jesus, it is that we make him known that’s important.” Making Jesus known can only flow from a close relationship with him, and a close relationship can only be fostered when we walk with him through Scripture, talk with him in prayer, listen to him through silence and contemplation, meet him in the sacraments and learn from all his other intimate friends that we call the church, especially those who have gone before us.

Above all, we need to have confidence that Jesus is forever praying for us. His intercessions for our life conformed to his life is constantly flowing between Father and Son through the Spirit; “I pray for them” says Jesus. And then comes that sobering part of the priestly prayer, “I am not praying for the world.” What does this mean? We often hear it said that Christians are in the world but not of it, and this comes up in many different ways in the gospels and epistles. We know that we are formed by the culture that we live within, and much of that culture is expressed by a humanism that elevates mankind above God. In these cultures God cannot be normative, so faith in the one true God has to be reduced to the level of what is acceptable to all creeds and none, and this often brings the world this creates into conflict with what God desires and asks of us to catch his vision of eternity made manifest in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Our mission is a divine one and the world can never fully be the vehicle of attaining this divine life with God.

The world wants the pursuit of religion to be a purely personal, locked away activity. At its most tolerant, the world sees the pursuit of active faith as something quaint but arcane and best kept behind a closed door. To paraphrase a poem of Venerable Archbishop Sheen, the world will

“Call me master but obey me not. Call me light and see me not. Call me way and walk not. Call me life and desire me not. Call me wise and follow me not. Call me fair and love me not. Call me rich and ask me not. Call me eternal and seek me not. Call me gracious and trust me not. Call me noble and serve me not. Call me mighty and honour me not. Call me just and feed me not. So if i condemn thee, blame me not.”

Mostly what we call the world in relation to the faith is seen in the words of this poem, not hostile but tepid, lukewarm.

At its worst, the world will round on the faithful when it steps out from behind its walls, St Peter warns of this in his epistle and adds that we should not be ashamed when the world insults us but thank God that we are worthy to be insulted because we are Christian.

But remember, as Jesus is no longer in the world but we are, we are glorified because of him, and the world might have its hour, but with our eyes fixed on Jesus and on eternity we will win the day.

AMEN