

Scripture for May 16 2021

John 17 (6-26) NIV

⁶ “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

¹³ “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Sermon: Jesus Prayed for Us!

Graduation ceremonies are known to contain loads of speeches, as well as being a time to celebrate the achievements of individuals and the whole class. There are thank yous to be said, people to be acknowledged, memories and reminiscences to be re-lived, jokes to be shared, and optimistic pep-talks to be heard. In religious language, some speeches are ones of *blessing* and *commissioning* as students move on to the next stages of their lives. And then there are farewells and good-byes, since people will inevitably disperse in different directions. Consequently, there is both joy and tears. The Bible contains a number of farewell speeches, such as those of Moses¹ and Joshua.² And our reading today from John 17 is really the farewell speech that Jesus gives to his disciples just prior to his death.³ But if you listen closely, it is also applicable to just before his ascension, which is why this is one of the lectionary readings for today. [Ascension was celebrated on Thursday, May 13th, this year.] John cleverly formats this speech into a *prayer*, and we can even hear an aging John echoing similar sentiments to *his* community, perhaps aware that his own death is not far away. What is it that Jesus says? Let's see!

When a beloved *leader* is about to retire or leave, there is usually mention of how they have left the ongoing work to be done in a safe pair of hands. The leader therefore projects a vote of confidence, effectively a *blessing*, on their successor. If that *isn't* mentioned, it doesn't bode well for the future and creates a climate of uncertainty. In Jesus' prayer to God for his followers, he places them in *God's own hands*. (You'll note there is no mention of Peter here!⁴) Jesus says: "I pray for . . . those you have given me, for they are yours. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, *protect them by the power of your name*, the name you gave me, so that they may *be one as we are one*."⁵ Jesus is boldly putting the onus back on God to protect the flock since the good shepherd⁶ is now returning to the Father.⁷ At the beginning of his prayer, Jesus *reminds* God that the disciples were originally God's and that God had only *entrusted* them to Jesus.⁸ Jesus then *tells* God that he has faithfully taught them *everything* he knows about God,⁹ and that they know that Jesus himself came *from* God.¹⁰ Because Jesus knows this death, resurrection, and ascension are immanent,¹¹ he returns the ongoing responsibility for the wellbeing of his followers back to God!¹² This may seem an audacious thing to say to God! But John's gospel emphasises the unique relationship Jesus

¹ Deut 31-33.

² Josh 23-24.

³ Since the 16th century, John 17 is been referred to as "Jesus' high-priestly prayer." This is *not* a "death-bed" prayer!

⁴ See John 21:15-25 for Peter's "reinstatement" following this earlier thrice denial of Jesus.

⁵ John 17:9,11.

⁶ See John 10, particularly 10:14-15, where Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

⁷ See John 17:18; 3:17; 5:13; 6:38; 12:44 on Jesus "sent" by God in John—hence now "returning" to God.

⁸ John 17:6. Some theologians sometimes speak of divine "election" here. See also John 17:1-5.

⁹ John 17:7-8a. In 17:11 Jesus speaks of God's "name," meaning the *nature* or *character* of God.

¹⁰ John 17:8b, 10. See also John 1:1-5, 14; 14:9, 11; Phil 2:6–11.

¹¹ In John's language, that "his hour had come," 13:1; 17:1. In John the triple "glorification" of Jesus is his being *lifted-up* on the cross, his being *raised* from the dead, and his *ascending* to be with God the father.

¹² Jesus also reminds God that he has been faithful in his charge, save for Judas Iscariot (John 17:12).

has with the Father, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. What Jesus *is* modelling, however, is for us to pray with *boldness* to God because we can have *confidence* in God's *character*. While our own *petitions* to God always need to be asked with a spirit of humility, they are articulated in light of our *faith* in God's *identity* and, like Jesus, we can trust God to be true to his nature and purposes.

There's something else too. If you think about it for a moment, this kind of prayer is jokingly referred to as an "announcement prayer" in that Jesus is telling his *audience* some important news, or information, while praying to God!¹³ The disciples need *reminding* that in the uncertain days to come, they are to look to God for *his provision* and *protection*. After all, Jesus *knows* that the God the Father will care for them every bit as much as he has done himself. Moreover, Jesus reminds his followers that they need to be *united*, that they will be one as he and God are one.¹⁴ Christian unity is often emphasized but, sadly, not often realized; but you can see it makes sense in the context of a farewell speech. When a leader departs, not only is the successor elevated and supported, but any potential dissenters or factions need to be reminded of their *common* vision, and to pull *together* - not apart. Jesus says that the basis of their community's unity is to be found in the tight bond between Jesus and God the father, an authentic unity based on *love*.¹⁵ Jesus also knows that going forward without him, the effectiveness of God's mission will depend on genuine *teamwork*, unity-in-diversity that is based on *God's* priorities. The *results* of that unity will be that the world will see that this *kind* of human community – one that is united across all traditional barriers of race, customs, gender, sexual orientation, or class - can *only* come from the action of the creator God. And if that is evident, others may come to believe.

Jesus also knows that his followers are at serious risk.¹⁶ John uses some strange phrases concerning the relationship between Jesus, his followers, and the "world" - strong rhetoric which may seem strange to us and worth explaining. For example, Jesus prays, "[Father], I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world¹⁷ . . . They are *not* of the world, even as I am not of it."¹⁸ He also says, "I have given the world your word and the world has *hated* them . . ."¹⁹ John's use of the word "world" (Greek, *cosmos*) *doesn't* mean the *physical* universe as we know it. He is describing those elements that actively seek to distance themselves from God, who have chosen darkness rather than light, and have organized themselves to *oppose* God and his kingdom.²⁰ The world, then, is a hostile place for those who would dedicate themselves to God; after all, Jesus is facing his crucifixion.²¹ So, given that context, what does

¹³ John 17:13 also makes this explicit. Ministers are warned at seminary *not* to make announcement prayers! However, we often do: "We pray for XXX *who is currently in hospital* . . ." so bringing a need before God and telling the congregation why! This is clearly a clever rhetorical technique being employed by John.

¹⁴ John 17:11b

¹⁵ John 13:34–35. This unity is *not* meant to just be an *outward* appearance, wallpapering over multiple cracks!

¹⁶ Jesus knows the precarious situation he is in right now; his "hour has come" and his death is imminent.

¹⁷ John 17:11a

¹⁸ John 17:16. See also 17:18.

¹⁹ John 17:14.

²⁰ See also John 1:10–11; 7:7; 12:31; 15:18–19; 16:8–11.

²¹ That's also why his followers need both divine protection and for them to be unified.

Jesus pray? He says, “My prayer is *not* that you take them *out* of the world but that you *protect* them from the evil one.”²² This is one of the crucial things to take away from this prayer, and I want to expand on it a little further today.

We *all* face the temptation to *escape* from the world! That is the basis of vacations and the tourism industry. We want to leave our daily worlds behind and travel to an idyllic, even exotic, haven of tranquility and beauty. For others, vacations are an escape from responsibility and to “party” the day and night away in the company of like-minded others! We also see this desire to escape in real estate.²³ Celebrities and the rich and famous live in mansions on large estates, and others too live in gated-communities to exclude them from the outside “world.” I am not passing judgement here, just making an observation. After all, there may be good reasons for this self-isolation, for security, to avoid conflict, fans, media interest, and the clamour of the “world.” Church history has also encouraged a streak of escapism, with its monasteries, nunneries, retreat centers, communes, etc. All of them try to develop a particular shape and ethos that creates space unencumbered by the “world” and one that will allow for what is perceived to be a fuller realization of faithful, holy living. Some of you may know that my favorite radio detective is Father Baldi,²⁴ a Franciscan priest and academic who, as an amateur detective, helps the police solve their crimes - not unlike Father Brown. At the culmination of many seasons, Father Baldi says to his critical superior, who frowns on Baldi’s activities, “The *challenge* is to be *in* the world *not* to withdraw from it.”²⁵ He’s right, that *is* the challenge, and we don’t always get the balance right, but the principle is sound. The scriptwriters understood the point Jesus was saying: we are to be “*in* the world but not *of* it.”²⁶ Paul says the same thing: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.”²⁷ John and Paul say such things because they knew the temptation to compromise, fit in, go under the radar – so to speak – was, and is, very real. Yes, we are human and so can become exhausted or burnt-out, and therefore we need vacations, retreats, etc. But they must always be seen as re-energizing or regrouping for our normal, on-going activities - sometimes in a different direction - but never with the view of abandoning the world. After all, we can’t remain on vacation all year! And withdrawing from the “world” only enables darkness to thrive.

Because Jesus knows how hard it is to get the balance right, he prays for his followers: “Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth.”²⁸ The word “sanctify” may sound negative, like a “holier than thou,” but it really means “being set apart” for a particular purpose – in this case, to bring Christ’s good news

²² John 17:15. Note, John 3:16-17,19 need to be understood in this context of John’s usage of “world.”

²³ Think too of the proverb, “An Englishman’s home is his castle,” attributed to Sir Edward Coke (1604).

²⁴ See: <https://www.audiobooks.com/audiobook/father-paolo-baldi-mysteries-the-complete-bbc-radio-crime-series/393397> .

²⁵ Baldi continues: “Hiding away from the world as God created it is just as unhealthy as living merely for the “flesh,” both can lead to unnatural appetites.” (Actually, the hint is that Baldi is about to leave the priesthood . . . !)

²⁶ See also John 15:19; 1 John 2:15; Rom 12:2; James 1:27.

²⁷ Rom 12:2. Paul’s use of “world” can be understood as “the present (evil) age.”

²⁸ John 17:17,19; see also John 14:6. The use of “sanctify” links to “holy” in 17:11, i.e., they have the same root in Greek.

to the world.²⁹ Jesus is reminding his followers of their *calling*, of their identity as the *people* of God. Never forget *who* you are, says Jesus.

At the end of Jesus' prayer, he expands the circle for whom he prays:³⁰ "My prayer is *not* for them alone," says Jesus, "I pray also for those who *will* believe in me *through* their message."³¹ In one sense, Jesus is praying for *us*! And so we can be reassured by that inclusion. But more generally, it's a prayer for those in *any* generation who do *not* yet believe, that they may *come* to believe on account of the *witness* of the faith community. That those people will recognise *who* Jesus is³² because of the *character* of the Christ's followers, including their unity and their love. That is a sobering thought because the church so often has a bad reputation today. And many books have been written about why that is! There is antagonism against Christianity, as well as ambivalence towards it, or ignorance about the Christian faith, or perceiving the church as an irrelevance. Sometimes there are genuine and legitimate reasons for that. This has been true for *every* generation, which is why this prayer of Jesus is *still* important. Yes, the church – or parts of it - has often failed to live up to that high calling of being "set apart." We *don't* live in love. Instead, we *can* be inauthentic, judgemental, and hypocritical – and, in that sense, we behave like everyone else and are *rightly* deemed an irrelevance – or worse. But, in certain times and places, a vibrant, authentic, community shines brightly – and it's noticed by others. That is why we continue to pray for that reflection of God's glory to be *more* evident, and that the Holy Spirit continues to *transform* the church, for Christ's sake. So, the question is will Amherstburg know who Jesus is because of *our* character, love, and unity? I pray that is the case.

But there is more. As I said earlier, Jesus knew that his followers were *at risk*. John tells us that after the crucifixion, his followers were in hiding for fear of further reprisals against them from the authorities.³³ Nevertheless, after the Spirit came – which we will celebrate next Sunday – the church grew in boldness and effectiveness, and also in numbers. Yes, there was opposition, even persecution and martyrdom, but here we are today 2000 years later. While *we* may not face physical threats for our faith here today in Canada, let's not forget that there are still parts of the world that do. Nevertheless, I believe the church in Canada and the West is *still* at risk. Jesus' prayer was for those who *will* believe in him *through* the witness of *existing* believers. The risk, then, is the present generation of Christians will *not share* that message with others. As New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright puts it, "The church is never more than a generation away from extinction, and all it would take is for a single generation not to hand the word on." That's a sobering thought. It's not just about our communal life of love that is

²⁹ To be "holy" means to be "set apart" for work or duty that is considered sacred. It is a consecration of priestly activity – Exod 28:41, or for prophetic service – Jer 1:5. It means. Jesus has been sanctified and set apart for God's work in the world. Jesus therefore wants them to be set apart in the same way, i.e., to recognize that we do not belong to this "world" (see also 1 Pet 2:9). (Recall that Israel was meant to be a "holy nation," *not* because it behaved any better than the others – see the Old Testament! – but because God had *chosen* it to be a light to the world.)

³⁰ John 17:20-26.

³¹ John 17:20. John's Jesus is *not* praying for the "world" as such, but for those future people who will be responsive to his/their message.

³² John 17:22, 24 – Jesus the *glory* of the God the father in human form is a key theme in John.

³³ John 20:19.

important – though that *is* vital – it's also about our willingness to *pass on* what we have heard from the previous generation to the next generation. I think we all need to consider Wright's warning.

So, that is Jesus' farewell prayer or speech to the graduating class of disciples. As I said earlier, it is therefore a prayer and a message for us too. What words of encouragement or challenge have we heard afresh today - perhaps louder or clearer than before? Let us consider those words carefully and discern whether the Holy Spirit is their source. Amen, let us pray.