

When I first looked at the Gospel reading for today, I thought – this is a strange choice of reading for Mother’s day! It’s all about God as Father. This is the reading set for the last Sunday of Easter, which doesn’t always fall on the same Sunday as Mother’s Day. From an Anglican Church perspective, we celebrate Mothers on Mothering Sunday (Lent 4), which we did earlier this year, not on the North American, secular Mother’s Day. But when I thought about the words, I thought maybe at least some of the prayer addressed the mothering aspects of God. Jesus asks God to protect the disciples, which gives me the image we see elsewhere in the Gospels of Jesus as a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings. In most families, it’s the mother who protects the young, and supports them as they head out on their own. That’s as close I come to Mother’s day in this text!

But coming back to the Gospel reading as a whole, I wonder how much of what Bev just read you understood. Not easy, is it? I had to read it several times! Perhaps if we look at it in context ... In some ways, it’s out of place as a post resurrection reading, as it is part of the prayer Jesus prayed before he died. Jesus prays this prayer at his last meal with his disciples, after he’s washed their feet and after Judas has left to betray him. Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples takes about 4 chapters in John’s gospel. We heard part of it last week (love one another) and part the week before (I am the vine and you are the branches). Next week, Pentecost, we’ll hear another part, where Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit. In this lengthy speech, Jesus is preparing the disciples for both his death and for later persecution, and he ends the talk with a prayer, and today we came in in the middle of the prayer, so it’s like coming in in the middle of a conversation.

If you read John’s gospel, and compare it to any of the others, you’ll see that John’s account of the last night of Jesus’ life is very different from the story in the other three gospels – it’s not the Passover, no institution of the Eucharist, but a meal with lots of talking and washing feet, No prayer in gethsemane, but this prayer, which has been called for centuries The High Priestly Prayer.

There are a couple of points I want to make about this prayer which takes up all of Chapter 17 (we would read the other sections in other years, but we often miss this because we celebrate the Ascension on the last Sunday of Lent.) First, let’s remember that it’s not a set of instructions to us. Jesus is talking to God, praying for the 11 and asking God to “protect them from evil” and (if you read further) his prayer is for all of us who come after: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word” Jesus isn’t telling us what or how to be; he’s asking the Father to protect us - we, who have been given life in Christ, while we are in the world, since he is leaving the world.

We often hear well meaning, usually pious, people tell us that as Christians we should be “In the world but not of the world” The motto could seem to give the drift: We are in this world, alas, but what we really need to do is make sure that we’re not of it. In this way of configuring things, the starting place is our unfortunate condition of being “in” this world. . And our mission, it appears, is to not be “of” it. So the force is moving away from the world. “Rats, we’re frustratingly stuck in this ole world, but let’s marshal our best energies to not be of it.” No doubt, it’s an emphasis that’s sometimes needed, but isn’t something essential being downplayed? Notice that for Jesus being “not of the world” isn’t the destination in these verses but the starting place. Jesus reminds God that “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

If we follow Jesus, we move into the world. A week or so ago, the reading when Nigel and I celebrated Morning Prayer, was from John 1 with the famous phrase we associate with Christmas: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Christ came into the world; he went from being with God to being seen and known in the world. And that’s our destination, too. The world is not where the disciples are escaping from but should be their, and our, destination. Jesus isn’t gathering his disciples into a holy enclave where they will be “safe” from

temptation, but, he tells the Father, he's sending us out into the world, as God sent him. We are to continue his work in the world. And so he says: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." And don't miss the prayer of verse 15: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from evil."

And so Jesus prays for our protection. I also think there is a difference between protection and shielding. Here in Ontario (not in May, mind you!) an image that works for me is that we (and on Mother's Day, let's remember it's more often than not, the Mothers) dress our kids in snowsuits and hats and mittens and boots and then we send them out into the cold. We don't just hide out in the house with the nice warm furnace and hot chocolate and we don't shield our children from the weather. We protect them, yes, but, still, they are sent out into the wind and cold. I think God is like that with us as well. God doesn't help us to hide from the world and all its "stuff". God gives us what we need as protection ... the Word, faith, a conscience ...well, you get the idea.

We don't live in the church; we all live in the world, although it's still easy to surround oneself with people like ourselves, but who may go to other churches. Being in the world means meeting people from all walks of life, all faiths and no faith. People whom we get on with and people who rub us the wrong way. Jesus doesn't pray for us to be removed from the world – or removed from evil. It seems to me that we are expected to be in the world (and part of it) and with that comes seeing the face of Christ in all those we meet. If you read the homily I posted online a few weeks ago when we had to cancel the service because of the ice storm you may remember that I quoted Pope Francis who, in his recent apostolic exhortation on holiness in everyday life "*Gaudete et Exsultate*" (Rejoice and be Glad) invites us to be kind: don't gossip, stop judging and, most important, stop being cruel. It's that simple, but also that hard some days. As I tell my nursing home congregation, many of whom are in wheelchairs and / or cognitively challenged – smile at people, say thank you, be patient, listen when someone needs to talk, only say nice things, be a good neighbour. To quote another Francis, the saint of Assisi: Preach the Gospel; use words only when necessary.

Being in the world also means dealing with the issues it brings. It's dangerous; it brings all sorts of temptations. We may not be facing physical persecution, as John's initial readers were, but we are surrounded by people and ideas who are out of sync with our Christian lives and mission. We are surrounded by systemic issues– I think of Consumerism, the widening gap between rich and poor, both for individuals and groups here in Canada, and nations worldwide, self-gratification and selfishness (what I call "me-first-ism"), prejudices of all kinds - and ethical dilemmas, such as: abortion, medically assisted dying, how much of our time and treasure to give to others. What about stem cell research, genetic modification, population control, robots with artificial intelligence? Science has raised many questions not dealt with in the Bible. Even when we put on a mindset of love, there are many different ways to show love - Minimising suffering. Maximising happiness. Saving the planet. Looking after future generations. Worthy goals all, but what happens when they come into conflict? Living in the world means living with these questions, and doing our best to decide where our priorities lie. No one person can tackle every issue. With our provincial election coming up, though, we need to find out where our candidates and their parties stand on the issues in order to use our votes prayerfully and wisely.

We are not of, but sent into the world. I sometimes think Jesus should have left his future presence down here in more capable hands than ours! We're just not all that special. We feel no miraculous power coursing through our veins, our brains get blurry, we're tired, we're stressed, we're just so very...pedestrian, flat-footed, mortal...human. But we're it. So let's go out into the world courageously, trusting in God's protection to "let our light shine before others" and trust God to make use of our brave, if often feeble attempt.