**Sermon-Jesus prays for his disciples. Jn. 17: 6-19**

Today, we are at the third of the series of four on ‘Jesus’ final teaching and prayer.’ First, there was His teaching about the Holy Spirit, last week came the ‘prayer for Himself’, today ‘His prayer for the first believers-His disciples’ and, in a fortnight, ‘His prayer for later believers’-that’s us-the Church.

Intro. Do you recall the poem about Christopher Robin-“Hush, hush, whisper who dares, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.” It’s bland, very general-“God bless, Mummy, God bless, Daddy” then wandering thoughts kick in, as he notices his dressing gown-“it’s a beautiful blue-“ “God bless, Nanny, I quite forgot…” Does that sound like us? It, certainly, does for me. The Lord Jesus’ prayer, however, was specific. Not vague, no wandering thoughts and His prayer was focussed on His disciples (the first believers), who are defined and on what He wanted for them after He return to Heaven.

His Disciples-firstly, they were those who knew Him, knew that He was sent by God and were convinced that He was the Son of God, whom they could know as a friend and a Master. “They knew with certainty I came from you and they believed that you sent Me.” Jn. 17: 8b. This was the basis of their faith and commitment. They, also, knew that His teaching came from God. “Now they know that everything you have given Me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave Me and they have accepted them.”Jn. 17: 7c & 8. His teaching had the ring of truth, might cut to the heart of things, make great demands, but gave great comfort-“Come unto Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Matt. 11: 28

Secondly, the disciples had been given to Jesus by God the Father, who had facilitated their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.”My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” “I gave them eternal life….no one can snatch them out of My hand.” Jn. 10: 28 & 29 Their belief was not a flash in the pan. God had not made a mistake. The disciples were a permanent gift to the Lord Jesus.“ God the Father and God the son would protect them. This was an enormous reassurance to them, when they felt or even feared they had let him down so badly, He would reject them. His love, however, would keep them and us (in similar circumstances) in His hands, if we repented.

The disciples obeyed God’s word-the Truth. “You gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.” Indeed, “your word is truth.” Jn. 17: 6c/17b. It had been given to them-“I have given them your word.” Jn. 17: 14a. It is wonderful, as we obey Him, to have what is real and of value in life like love, compassion integrity, forgiveness and God’s presence rather than the substitutes like wealth, power, consumerist aspirations and being one up. All are substitutes to fill a basic emptiness. Moreover, “The God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel (good news) of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” 2 Cor. 4: 4. There is however, a downside to obeying God’s word-we will be hated by the world-that is the people, mindsets and principles that are hostile to God. “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.” Jn. 17: 14 The Lord Jesus was hated by the world, too, as so many Christian, who are persecuted in Nigeria, the Middle East and elsewhere, know to their cost-their livelihoods and even their life. Open Doors suggests that persecution of Christians is on a wider and more intense scale than ever before. Even in the UK we may feel cold shouldered, ignored, dismissed as out of touch or suffer even to the point of losing a job.

On the other hand, there is an upside “and glory has come to Me through them.” Jn. 17: 10. The disciples can bring glory or honour or renown to the Lord Jesus. As they and we show compassion or turn the other cheek, they and we reflect something of his character. This should be the mark of a Christian. This is the challenge of Christian living “Let your light shine before men, that they see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”Matt. 5: 16. Do they praise me or us or the Father?

The burden of the Lord Jesus’ prayer. Firstly-protection for His disciples.”..they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name… While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe…None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction…”Jn. 17: 11b & 12. In v. 15 “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil on.”This was needed then as it’s needed now, for we are hated by the world. It is crucial that, though we are in the world, we are not of it-as He prayed for us. We were reminded before about “the god of this world”-the evil one-who has many weapons or lures to use-be they weaknesses of the flesh, or the pressures and cares of life, disappointments, opinions of others or lack of Christian fellowship. From all these the first disciples and we need protection, so that we escape being overwhelmed now and remain united “so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jn. 17: 11c. Divisions can wreck a fellowship as it has done, sadly, through the ages in the Christian Church. Divisions bring no glory to the Lord Jesus, whereas a unity does. Even in politics this is true-Tories take note!

Secondly, experience of the Lord Jesus’ joy “so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them.” Jn. 17:13b. Joy, here, is more a quality than just an emotion. It is grounded in God and derived from Him-it is a fruit of the Spirit Gal. 5: 22. It is hard to define, but it is mentioned, for instance, when the Saviour’s birth is announced, so perhaps, it’s a mixture of relief, thanksgiving, a serene assurance that we are in safe hands now. A child, who has lost its mother in a crowd, is overwhelmed with joy when they are reunited. The disciples need the “full measure of His joy” That’s a real challenge for them and us. It is linked to His last request.

Thirdly, they should be sanctified. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth…For them I sanctify Myself that they, too, may be truly sanctified.” Jn. 17: 17 & 19-this can sound so forbidding, but it means being set apart for some special use. He is praying that the disciples’ lives should be shaped by His Truth. For us this will mean the Lord Jesus’ compassion, love, beauty, joy, uprightness and purity-to name a few characteristics should be seen in us. To speak for myself, it is so easy to slip into being grumpy or snappish or unkind and bad. How do we achieve the former, which the Lord has prayed for us? We need to be in touch with him daily-the arrow prayer-the reading and chewing over of Scripture. What is the purpose of this? The Lord prayed “As you sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” Jn 17. 18. We are sent out to make a difference where we are-to make our tiny bit of the world a better place. What a challenge for us to take on as our aim, but what a splendid purpose to have !

To sum up the disciples knew that Jesus was the Son of God, that His teachings came from God, that they were given to the Lord Jesus by His Father and that they obeyed God’s word despite incurring the world’s hostility. Consequently, His prayer for them was for protection, the experience of His joy and that they should be set apart for his work in the world, even though they were not of it. Paul’s prayer in Eph. 3: for the disciples there echoes the Lord’s prayer for our protection-“I pray that out of his glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Eph. 3: 16. For our experience of His joy, “I pray that you being rooted and established in love….may know this love that surpasses knowledge.” Eph. 3: 17b & 19b. Paul prays that they may be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Eph. 3: 19c. We are set apart for His work-to be a light for Him. These are all great challenges. We need to pray for His help to face up to them. Paul reminds us that He “is able to immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine..”Eph. 3: 20, but we, also, know He has prayed, already, for the first disciples so that, together with them we are part of His plan, which should encourage us.