

As we read through the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, we find many incidences of Jesus praying, and in some of those cases, the gospel writers share the content of his prayers.

The most famous one is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples when they came to him and asked him to teach them to pray. We pray that prayer just about each week here at St Ives Uniting, and Christians throughout the world and throughout the centuries have prayed it as well. Whether we know it as 'The Lord's prayer' or the 'Our Father', if people have spent any time in and around churches, they will almost certainly know it.

Two more of Jesus' prayers are also well known. The first is his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, after the last supper, and before his was arrested. Luke (22:44) tells us that "...being in anguish, [Jesus] prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." – and his prayer? "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

And the other one is the prayer that Jesus prayed from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34, KJV) A prayer so simple, and yet so meaningful. Of course, at a practical level, they knew what they were doing! The Romans were pretty good at crucifying people. But more deeply they didn't know – they didn't know they were crucifying the son of God! But hanging there on the cross, alone and in anguish, Jesus' concern was for them, "Father, forgive them" he prayed.

But we don't always know the words that Jesus used when he prayed. The first chapter of Mark's gospel tells us that "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35) Later on he tells us that Jesus sent his disciples ahead to Bethsaida, and "he went up on a mountainside to pray." (Mark 6:46) Jesus did need to get away from the pressures of his ministry, from his disciples, and spend time in prayer with his Father in heaven.

But here in today's reading from John's gospel, we get to hear one of Jesus' longer prayers. It is a beautiful, inspiring prayer offered by Jesus for his disciples. His disciples – not just the eleven# present as he prayed, but for all his disciples – those who followed him, and indeed, as the verse after our reading tells us, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." That's us.

We get, in this reading, to hear Jesus praying for us. Which is pretty cool when you stop to think about it. And just like his prayer from the cross, even when things are going badly, Jesus' concern – his prayerful concern – is for his followers. For each one of us.

It is nice to be prayed for. It is a sign of caring. It is a sign of love – the love that we've looked at over the last two weeks in church. As we show our love for others, as we lay down our lives for them, we should also be praying for them.

There's the story of the woman who tells the minister that she can't attend some event because she's not well, and the minister says, "Oh, I'll pray for you." The woman responds, "I'm not that sick!" Sometimes we think that it's only the direst needs that are deserving of God's attention through our prayers.

Prayer is personal and it's important. I hold a position where people often ask me to pray for them – or with them – and it's always a privilege to do so. But praying is something that we, as followers should be doing for each other. And we should be confident to ask each other to pray for us, as well.

Of course, healing from sickness and injury is the main thing we are used to praying for, but there are many more aspects of our lives that we should be upholding in prayer.

Prayer is God's gift to us it opens us up to God's promises, and invites God to help us, as well as those we pray for. To help, to heal, to inspire, to encourage, to strengthen, to comfort, to bring peace – peace in our lives, and also peace in our world. They're all things that we should be praying for.

And in today's reading, we are reminded that Jesus prays for us. Jesus' disciple John was there, heard Jesus praying it, and recorded it. So here we are, two thousand years later, getting to listen in on Jesus' prayer – albeit conveniently in English and not the original Aramaic.

It is a long and beautiful prayer, but it's also complex – so I want to look at just a couple of parts of it today.

This prayer occurs late in Jesus' ministry, at the end of that last week in Jerusalem. At the last supper. Jesus prays this prayer just before he and his closest disciples, Peter, John and James – his closest friends – head out to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew what was going to happen – at least in general terms. We hear Jesus say in this prayer: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you." (17:11) So, Jesus knows that he is going to the Father, but his followers are not – at least not yet. He will no longer be with them in the same way, which leads to the next part of his prayer. "While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.... I am coming to you now." (17:12-13a)

Jesus is, in a way, letting go. He will no longer be able to do what he has done for them up to this point. Something like what we experience when a child moves away. We've known the change is coming, we've prepared them for it. But the time has come to be separated.

Jesus is preparing to go to the cross and ultimately to ascend to the Father. But now, as he prays, it is time for his disciples – all his disciples, then and now - to do this without Jesus physically with them.

While Jesus was with his disciples, he could protect them. He would take the challenges. He would take the brunt of the criticism. He would be the one in danger from the authorities. But from his arrest, things would change. And so he prays: "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." And the reason he is praying for their protection is important: it is "so that they may be one..."

'Being one' is important. To be together is important. To strengthen in other. To pray for each other. To encourage each other. To comfort each other. To be the church – the body of Christ – together. We are all different, of course, and we will all have our different preferences, too.

I've heard people say things like "the church is a great idea... the problem is all the people there". But, if we are truly loving each other, and laying down our lives for each other, then we won't be the problem.

I've known churches to be divided by all sorts of things – within congregations and between congregations and denominations. Big, theological things – infant baptism, the ordination of women and same sex marriage and so on... but also on things that may not be quite so theological – paint colours, carpets and seats.

There's a great saying that the devil doesn't care what churches argue about, just as long as we are arguing. Jesus himself said, in another context, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that

kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. (Mark 3:24-25)

If we are divided, if we are arguing, we are not able to give ourselves fully to being the body of Christ in the world. So Jesus prays “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.”

And then, in his prayer, Jesus asks something else of God for us, he prays, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 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.” (17:18-19).

Sanctify them by the truth.

Sanctify means to set apart. Jesus is praying that we would be set apart. Ultimately, although we are in the world, we don't belong to the world. Our actions, as followers of Jesus, take place in the world – just as Jesus' ministry took place in the world.

I've heard it illustrated like this: An ocean liner has sunk. There are passengers struggling to stay afloat. But there are lifeboats and life rafts – enough for all the people. And when people make it into the lifeboats, they can reach out to those still in the water and help them to safety. We have been set apart – sanctified – in a similar way. We no longer “belong” to the ocean. And we have the special position of being able to help those who do.

The world is a fallen place. There is sickness and disease, and invasion and war, and famine and poverty, and all the rest of it. Even here in St Ives, where we are so blessed compared to so much of the world, there are problems, major problems, and so many people are struggling.

But we are sanctified - we are not of the world anymore. We follow Jesus. We know that our God loves us and all this world, and that makes all the difference. We can and will still be touched by all the problems of the world – but we have something more. We have made our way onto the lifeboat, or more accurately, Jesus has brought us into his lifeboat. Now, we are in a unique position to help others.

“Sanctify them [-Set them apart'] in the truth,” Jesus prays. But what is the truth? In the modern world, “truth” is often a relative thing... or a flexible thing. It seems people no longer share an objective standard truth. We hear of people ‘living their own truth’.

But when we get down to it, truth is not relative. They might be complex, but ultimately, things are true... or they're not true.

We know that Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) The truth is an absolute. And Jesus is that truth.

So Jesus prays for us, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” And the word? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

The words of Jesus' prayer immediately after “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” are these: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” Sure enough, we have been sent into the world, in the same way that Jesus was sent into the world. Not to save the world ourselves, but to introduce the saviour to the world. To remind the world of God's undying love for all this world – so great a love that he sent his only begotten son into the world to give up his life for it.

Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He is our way, our truth, and our life. He loves us, he died for us, and he prays for us. Then and now. Praying that we would be protected from evil. Praying that we would be joined together as one, as his church, as his body. And praying that we would be so secure in his truth, so confident in him, that we would be able to reach out to those around us, those who are struggling in the world, struggling to find hope, struggling to find the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus is that truth. And he asks that we share it with the world. Let us do so faithfully, to the glory of God.

Amen