

'Trusting in Jesus Is Living Life in Hope'

By Anand Peter

Jesus gave Christians a great commission, saying, "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). He follows this with an intense intercessory prayer for His Christians, that they may be protected and equipped to fulfil His will in spirit and in truth. As someone once said, just as being born in a motor garage will not make a person a motor car, being born to Christian parents, or regular attendance at church services, will not, of itself, make a person a good Christian. A Christian is one who learns from the teachings of Jesus Christ and lives according to His commandments. While church services remain necessary, chiefly for learning the teachings of Jesus in depth, and for fellowship with other Christians, we need also to do our share of evangelism as disciples of Jesus. It lies outside the scope of this sermon to discuss how we ought to go about propagating the Good News of redemption and salvation to the unreached; I shall leave the particulars for another occasion. The passage before us today calls, rather, for theological exposition, and it is from the perspective of what we may take away from it that we shall consider the prayer of Jesus this evening.

Consistent with the great Johannine theme, eternal life begins with Christians coming to know "the only true God," and with understanding Jesus Christ as the One whom God has sent into the world, inseparable in His being from the Triune God. These words introduce the lengthy prayer of John chapter seventeen, in which Jesus continues His address to His disciples, seeking to build their confidence and hope in the face of His imminent "departure" from them, and of His coming suffering and death upon the Cross. Both they, and the faithful hearers of John's Gospel, ancient and modern alike, now "listen in" upon His words as He prays to the Father on behalf of those left behind in the world, then and now. Let us examine, briefly, what this prayer means for us.

We have an innate need to feel safe. The new-born child nestles into its mother's arms to hear her heartbeat, and to know that nothing untoward will happen so long as she is there. The adult, startled awake by a terrible dream, clings to the knowledge that he or she is safe in bed at home, and not falling from an aeroplane, or fleeing from some pursuing beast. We want to feel safe, because very often we do not. We feel adrift in the world. We feel there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves. We often feel powerless to bring about change, or to secure anything good for ourselves or for others. And even when we are able to help and protect ourselves and those we love, we know there remains a hard limit to what can be done. We can raise our children well, and equip them for life, but we cannot shield them from every hardship. We can make the most careful provision for our retirement, and yet cannot prevent an unforeseen bill, or an economic downturn, from eating into our savings. Life, at such times, can feel not a little hopeless.

What a comfort it is, then, to hear the words of this prayer of Jesus in this evening's Gospel passage. Did you notice how frequently the language of protection recurs within these few verses? Jesus says, again and again, that His disciples belong to Him and to the Father, asking the Father to guard them, to keep them, and to sanctify them. All these images invoke a powerful sense of protection, closely resembling

the assurance given in Psalm 46. Let us examine a few of the principal themes that emerge from this prayer of our Lord.

Perhaps the most significant of the themes running through this remarkable prayer is that of giving, which occurs some nine times, and characterises the theology of the whole passage. It expresses a mutual outpouring of giving: both the Father and the Son are givers, and their mutual giving constitutes the grace which those who belong to Jesus have inherited, and in which they are now found to live. Once again, it is precisely in this act of giving that the Father and the Son are shown to be joined as One. As the Father does, so does the Son; as the Father is a giver, so the Son imitates the Father in His giving. As members of the family of Jesus, we too must understand the significance of giving as the very starting point of our work for Him.

A second theme emerges from the first. It tells the Christian believer that we belong to the household of the Triune God. Most important among the gifts given by the Father and the Son is the privilege of belonging to Jesus. By His act of redemption upon the Cross, shedding His own holy blood, He has purchased us. To know ourselves as belonging to Jesus is, therefore, to know this belonging as integral to the very nature and purpose of the Father and the Son.

A third privilege the believer receives is the knowledge and truth of God the Father. In the opening words of His prayer, in John 17:6, Jesus prays, "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word." The expression "name" here represents the whole, encompassing understanding of God. This knowledge comes from knowing Jesus, who is the very image of God. It stands for all that God is, and all that He has done, most fully revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To know that name is to have one's life established and sustained in the power of that name — to be protected and guarded within it.

Jesus goes on to pray, "For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me" (John 17:8). In the context of John's witness that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), we ought to understand the expression "word" here as meaning Jesus Himself. Much as Paul asserts that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38), so the very glory of Jesus, revealed in His death upon the Cross and in His resurrection, is focused upon the community of believers who now belong to Him. Jesus' prayer claims an intimate oneness in His concern for those who are the objects of the Father's giving of love, given through the Son.

In the final part of His prayer, Jesus prays, "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth" (John 17:18-19). Though pure, being God the Son, Jesus sanctified Himself for the sake of the believers who would, in consequence, themselves be sanctified, being made one with Him. The world hated Him, and it is likely that the world will hate all who go out into it to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. Yet, in spite of that risk, and precisely because of the Father's love, this community of disciples is sent out into the world, just as the Father's love sent the Son into the world — a world that both rejects the

Word, not knowing Him (John 1:10), and yet contains those who belong to Him (John 17:14). The world remains, too, the object of the Father's love, and of the believer's continuing love and mission toward it.

As Christians, we are sent into the world armed with the Word in its two-fold sense — the Father's Word made flesh, and the words of that Word, the Gospel truth. We are guarded and sustained by that word, and by His presence in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor and Comforter, and so are strengthened to face the world in the mission entrusted to us by Jesus. In John 14:21, Jesus sums this up: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him."

Let us pray: God of truth and life, we thank You for sending Your Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the initiator and perfecter of our faith. He has taught us to believe in You and in Him, that we might come to a perfect understanding of the truth. Grant us hearts bold enough to face the world, and the ability to proclaim the Good News to the unreached, in fulfilment of His great commission, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.