

During the lockdown, Bishop Nick has been writing to his clergy every few days. He offers encouragement, wise words of advice, and gentle yet clear leadership. His latest letter came yesterday, and it began like this:

‘Once again we live in the in-between times. Jesus has ascended, leaving his friends to get on with the job. And we wait for the Holy Spirit to empower and drive us out from the familiar places and ways into something new and as yet unknown. This is our story; this year we inhabit it differently as we wait for Pentecost, praying and looking with anticipation.’

Bishop Nick goes on to say, ‘we always knew ‘emergence’ would prove to be more complex than lockdown’. He then outlines how the next few months may look for church communities. But none of us can really know.

So here we are in these ‘in-between’ times after Ascension Day and before Pentecost, now known as the ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ season. Normally, our task during these times is to open ourselves up to receive and to celebrate the coming of God’s Holy Spirit, to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom here on earth, and to discern by the guidance of that same Spirit the part we are to play in the mission of the Church. That task is made all the more complex in these ‘in-between’ times of lockdown. So let us see how God may be guiding us through his holy word.

On all but one of the six Sundays since Easter Day our gospel readings have been taken from Saint John’s gospel. Today, we are looking at the beginning of chapter 17 of John, which as a whole is often referred to as Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer.

Traditionally, that prayer of Jesus is the subject of our reflections in the Maundy Thursday Watch of Prayer. Jesus is about to be arrested and taken from his disciples; and, as we all know, he would then suffer on the cross. So, at the Last Supper in that upper room and in the relative calm before the unwarranted arrest he knew was coming, Jesus says farewell to his disciples. He then he prays for them – and for us also.

In the second half of that High Priestly Prayer, in verses 20 and 21 of chapter 17, Jesus says ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one... so that the world might believe’. Jesus is praying for the ‘holy, catholic and apostolic Church’ – of which we are part and in which we affirm our belief through our Creed. His prayer is that we and all believers may express our unity in love, and thereby fulfil our mission to lead the world into belief. After all, how are those around us and who will come after us to believe unless it is through us?

How poignant it is, then, having encountered that prayer of Jesus in the depths of Holy Week to be revisiting it in Eastertide. In doing so we are affirming that life and love are stronger than death. And in doing so during these ‘in-between’ days after Ascension Day and before Pentecost – with Christians of all denominations praying ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ and ‘Come, Holy Spirit’ – we are affirming our desire to ‘build one another up’ in love. That desire for Christian unity, ‘that we may all be one’, is not simply an end in itself: it is in order that ‘the world might believe’

It is a good thing, especially in these days when our church buildings are locked, that it is hard to know where ‘the Church’ ends and ‘the world’ begins – and vice-versa. Acts of kindness are not exclusive to Christians or indeed to people of any faith. As we have seen during the current lockdown, acts of kindness unite us in our common humanity: we all depend on each other.

We read in the first Letter of John that ‘God is love and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them’. So where we see love we see evidence of God’s kingdom, a kingdom which knows no bounds. And the same applies to *any* of the other fruit of the Spirit: *love*, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

As Christians, we are clear in our belief as to the source of these fruit, and our desire is to see them grow. That then is our mission, in prayer and worship and witness, in word and in deed – that the world might believe.

As Bishop Helen-Ann has written on Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, ‘Jesus seems to be saying that life won’t be without pain, hatred and cost, but that God’s love is the strong thread that binds all of us together. That is especially powerful at this ‘in-between’ time of lockdown when we are separated from one another and from many of our familiar routines.’

So in this ‘in-between’ time, when as with the disciples after the Ascension we might feel that we have been left to fend for ourselves, let us remember that Jesus was first ‘lifted up’ on the Cross. What at first had seemed to the disciples to be a total defeat led to glory as Jesus was then ‘lifted up’ to sit at the right hand of the Father. There he intercedes for us.

Our God is faithful. He will never abandon us. He can redeem *any* situation. As we gradually begin to emerge from lockdown, not only will he protect us and empower us by his Spirit, he will enable us to continue the transforming work of his kingdom here on earth: that the world might believe – and have life in his name.

Come, Holy Spirit’; ‘Thy Kingdom Come’.  
Amen.