

**The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Sunday, 24th May 2020**



Dear Friends in Christ,

***'Protect them by the power of Your name, the name you gave me,
so they may be one as we are one.'***

(John 17: 11)

This Seventh Sunday of Easter, it feels as if our theological chronology has gone a little up the creek! On Thursday, we celebrated the Ascension of Christ as He was lifted from His earthly embodiment to be reunited with His Father in heaven. But here we are three days later, with Jesus very much on earth and praying for His disciples in the hours before His crucifixion. Confused? Fear not!

Today, we hear Jesus as he offers up to God the greatest prayer ever prayed! To be precise, what we actually hear in this passage, is the first section of Jesus' prayer: Jesus asks God that the disciples be united in harmony and love just as the Father Son and Holy Spirit are united. Here we glimpse what is on Jesus' mind in those final precious hours before His arrest and crucifixion. This is Christ's intimate prayer for the church today: that we continue in His love.

We have been taken back to Jesus' Farewell Discourse known as the '*High Priestly Prayer*' for the people He loves for a very important reason. On the night before he dies, Jesus prays for all those who believe in Him to share together, as one body, in the love and fellowship of God. We come back to this vital message in these days after Jesus has finally left the disciples, to help us understand what they themselves were grappling with as they regrouped back in the Upper Room after Jesus' Ascension. For their work and our work, their mission in Christ's name and ours, is that we work together. Why? Because now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, WE become the body of Christ here on earth!



From 'The Maestà' Altarpiece in Siena Cathedral by Duccio di Buoninsegna

In the upper room on that Thursday evening, with all His beloved apostles gathered around him for their final agape meal of love, Jesus prayed, not just for his apostles, but for *all* disciples in *every* age: for you and for me, right here, right now. He prayed for us that we might continue to follow His glorious example by the way we also live: in and through Jesus in unity with our fellow Christian believers; following Him through His word; and growing the church in number as we do so. If we stay close to these commands, Jesus assures us that we will be protected from the forces of the world which strive constantly to destroy our unity with God's love.



'Prayer' by Mike Moyers

These three themes each speak of the same reality; each in itself *is* that reality. Theologically speaking, union with the divine and inclusion in the divine are, (not unsurprisingly!), rather difficult ideas to comprehend. But love, in the sense of a Godly merciful compassion, is an idea which is much easier for us to imagine. As He prays, Jesus is thinking way beyond the immediate concerns for His own life as he prepares for His death. He was thinking of us, and for all believers who would come to faith through His love.



The Ascension of Jesus Christ in Neamt Monastery, Romania

Our celebration of Ascension Day commemorates Jesus' Ascension into heaven 40 days after his resurrection. There is a connection to the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry. Yet here, after His death and resurrection, it was not *Jesus* in the wilderness but His *disciples*. Jesus spent these precious days meeting with the disciples, reassuring them of His divinity and His words echo across time to us now, as we too must reflect on how we will respond to Jesus' love for us.

The 'take-away' message of our scripture today is that we must not take our eyes off what we are doing as the body of Christ, which remains here on earth through the Holy Spirit and works in us and through us.

At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus' own Baptism reveals how His obedience in doing God's will is rewarded. Now, at the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus' prayer guides us back to *our* Baptism and encourages us to enter more deeply into relationship with God, living our lives and focussing our hearts to hold God at the centre of all we do.

The more we open our hearts to God and immerse ourselves in the life-giving waters of our Baptism, we will become increasingly Christ-shaped. Being animated by generosity will become, to coin a current cliché, our ultimate 'new normal.' Emboldened by Jesus' desire for justice, we will find ourselves speaking out on behalf of the vulnerable and refusing the values of the world which Coronavirus has shown us are deeply wrong. Touched by the sacrificial love of the Perfect Shepherd, we will reach out to those in need. Motivated by compassion, perhaps we will find the courage to sit down with those who live in the shadows and discover their needs. Imagine the body of Christ fuelled only by generosity, courage, love and compassion? It is these gifts of the Spirit for which our world thirsts. It feels like now is our chance to embrace this way of life.



'Awake My Soul' by Mike Moyers

If we take Jesus' prayer seriously, we, as a faithful community across The Downs Benefice - and across the whole of the Anglican Communion, will do all that we can to walk in this understanding of unity, faith and love, encouraging others to experience the joy this way of life gives us.

One of the rare joys of the current Coronavirus pandemic is the way our faith has become more accessible to people who would not normally want to walk through the doors of our churches on Sunday mornings. In their confusion and fear, desperation and distress, people on the fringes of faith have not only begun searching for answers in Jesus Christ, they have been engaging with the strength and solace, comfort and peace His love brings to all who seek Him. Though I long to worship in the holy sanctuary of our beautiful churches once more, there is another part of me that wishes they would never open again! At least not in the way we operated before.

Coronavirus has forced us to radically re-think what it means to be the body of Christ. All the wonderful, diverse ways we have been reaching out to people these past few months has reaped rich rewards, and I am delighted to be part of this movement – we are talking to each other via Zoom and other media, and somehow from the privacy of our own homes, I am hearing folks find the courage to ask questions, delight in the answers and risk joining in. Before the Pandemic, we were reticent to dip our toes into new technologies as much as many others feared exploring scripture. But almost overnight, we have grasped the nettle and our whole country is experiencing a revival in spiritual connection.



Illumine by Mike Moyers

As Jesus ascends to the Father, our Christian community is given the responsibility of witnessing to what we have learned about the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

May the greatest prayer ever prayed encourage us to experience Christ's love and shine it out to the world. What an exciting future we have before us – the living body of Christ, growing, teaching baptising and making disciples; meeting people where they are in the very real struggles of their lives, and sharing with them the peace which passes all understanding in the truth and joy of Jesus' unconditional love.

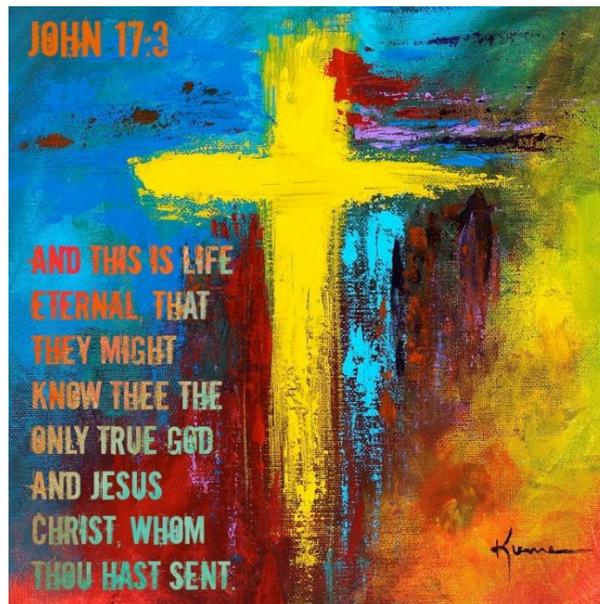
Yours, in the body of Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

O God the King of glory,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven:
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



John 17: 1-11 (NIV) - Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. 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.