

Easter 7 Year B 2021

Jesus says

'I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one'.

Jesus doesn't ask his Father to remove his followers from the world - what he asks for is protection. He is well aware of the dangers and evils of this world - indeed, in John's Gospel 'the world' is often used to describe everything which is contrary to God's will - the world is not just the physical universe. In John's Gospel 'the world' frequently means all that has rebelled against God, all that has chosen darkness rather than light, all that has organised itself in opposition against its creator.

Jesus has called his disciples out of that world and wants to ensure that they - and by inference, we - are not pulled back into it, with all its wickedness and rebellion. 'The world' in this dark sense must not be the place, the force, the sphere, that determines who the disciples, who we, most truly are.

Of course, there is protection and there is protection. There is a very human temptation to build walls around ourselves, for protection, or to build boundaries around our families, our communities, our churches, in an effort to guard what is within

and to keep 'the other' out. And the worst kind of boundary is the one we construct around our minds, to limit thought and creative imagination - gifts which God has given us, to enable us to love him, to seek him, to serve him.

My late husband, Colin, was sometimes called a wishy, washy liberal, and told to develop some kind of backbone - 'decide what you believe and stick with it'.

There was a gentleman who came to our monthly prayer group at St Ninian's, Glen Urquhart, who always challenged him - because he wanted definitive answers to all his questions, being a scientist by training, and Colin was a 'work in progress' type of person, seeking answers, but always willing to revisit a question. They both really enjoyed these occasions, and this gentleman (having moved south) still rings me and reminds me of the pleasure those conversations gave him - even though he never got definitive answers.

It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I am of the opinion that the road to heaven is littered with fondly held beliefs which have been discarded because prayer, study, thought, experience have shown them to be no longer valid, or

that they were just stepping stones on the way, and no longer needed.

Perhaps what we need is protection against self-doubt or lack of confidence or courage, as well as protection against the dark forces of the world, those aspects of life which are not of God and which can divert us or tempt us away from God's grace.

The potential to put ourselves beyond the love of God surely lies within each of us, not because God has decreed it, but because we choose it. That is what Judas did - as St Luke puts it in the Acts of the Apostles - Peter says 'Judas turned aside to go to his own place'. It is a rather humble way of describing Judas - but then Peter, remembering his own failing, knows he has been restored, forgiven, called again to service. Perhaps if Judas had not turned aside, but had returned, Jesus would have forgiven him too.

And now the eleven are now living in the confidence for which Jesus prayed. Jesus has called us, like them, to follow him and he gives us the gifts we need to make a good job of that. Of course we have our doubts, we struggle with questions of faith, but part of God's gift to us is perseverance, the desire to persist in spite of difficulty. And always remember that doubt is not the

opposite of faith - certainty is. Those walls which restrict our movements, our actions, our thoughts, cannot protect us, but God can and He hears the prayer of his Son on our behalf. If Jesus has confidence in us, as individuals and collectively as a church, then we should have confidence in ourselves and each other, as a force for good in the world, as opposition to the dark forces we recognise around us. We can be a force for tremendous good in the world, in our families and our communities, and on the wider scale, in great acts of generosity and in simple acts of kindness - in these things we make the presence of God manifest. Under the protection of Christ and his continual intercession for us, we can become confident disciples, sanctified and consecrated in the truth, full of his joy, and ready to spread his word by our living out the example of his love.