

Sixth Sunday of Easter, 16 May 2021
St Peter's, Plymouth

Gospel

St John 17:11-19

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said: "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Homily

We have just listened to Jesus, at the Last Supper, with his disciples gathered about him, just a few short hours before his arrest. You remember, he also mentioned 'those who will believe in me through their word' (*Jn 17:20*). That's you, and me! At the Last Supper Jesus prayed for us! the community of His disciples down the centuries.

St John, who gave us these words, listened intently at that Supper; his head resting next to the heart of Jesus (just as Jesus, says St

John in one of his letters, rests next to the heart of God himself). The beloved disciple listened. And what did he hear?

'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I ask not for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (17.17ff).

This then is Jesus talking to his Father about himself, and praying for us, his Church. As we pray for the Church's renewal in the Spirit of Pentecost, at a time when the Church is under increasing pressure from our contemporaries, I want to draw from those words this morning what seem to me to be two very important insights into the *real nature* of the Church.

2 First, there is one particular word which captures our attention, perhaps because it is difficult to understand. Jesus says: "For their sake I *consecrate* myself". What does that *mean*? Did not Peter call him 'the Holy One of God'? (cf. *Jn 6:69*)? How, then, can he consecrate himself now?

To understand, we need first to clarify what the Bible means by the words 'holy' and 'consecrate'. Holiness is a description of God's own nature. God's way of being, his nature, is unique to him, and it is *holy*. He alone is Holy One. All other holiness comes from him, and is a sharing in his way of being – light without darkness, truth without falsehood, good without any evil. When something or someone is 'consecrated', that thing or person is given to God as his property. It's taken out of our context and inserted into his. It no longer belongs to human affairs, but to God's will. To

consecrate is to take something from the world and give it over to the living God.

Such a 'giving up' of something and 'giving over' to God we also call a 'sacrifice'. It's my property no longer, but his property. It is a transfer of ownership – taken out of the world: given to God. So being made holy consecration is in fact a two-way process. A thing or a person is set apart for God. But for that precise reason it doesn't become isolated, taken out of use as it were. Quite the opposite! To be given over to God means *being made available for others*, indeed available for the greatest number of others. A priest for example is removed from worldly commitments and habits and given over to God, and therefore starting with God, he must be available for the greatest number of other people.

We can now perhaps understand what happens when Jesus says: 'I *consecrate myself* for them'. This is the priestly act by which Jesus gives himself over to the Father, and, being God's property is consequently given over to the whole world.

I consecrate – I sacrifice – myself, he says. It is a word that enables us to glimpse deep into the heart of Jesus Christ, his motivations and his commitments; and it is proof – yet again – that the Last Supper really is joined to the Crucifixion, it's not just a sentimental farewell meal. At the Last Supper Jesus *sacrificed himself, handing himself over* to God and his disciples; on the Cross he was *sacrificed by others, and handed over to the will of his enemies*.

And now we can perhaps more clearly understand the prayer which the Lord prayed for his disciples and for us, 'Sanctify them in the truth' – 'O Lord, draw them towards your self, your holiness. Take them away from themselves and make them *your* property, so that, living in you, they will spend their lives for the world.' The disciples and we are to be *immersed* in God's word, that creative power which unites our ordinary human lives to

God's mind and heart. And *because* we've been transferred to God's world, our life becomes God's mission. To be given to God, means to exist 'for' all those to whom God gives himself. The disciples' task will be to continue Jesus' mission, to be given to God and thereby to be on mission to all.

3 That brings me to the second thing I want, in briefer words, to draw out of our Blessed Lord's extraordinary prayer on the brink of his death.

As we listen to Jesus describing his sacrifice to God, we can hear emerging through these few words, all four of the distinctive marks of the Church.

Meditate on those few verses and you'll see how in them the whole nature not only of Jesus but of the Church is expressed.

- Jesus prays that we will be *holy* because he consecrates himself.
- Jesus says that he is *sending us* into the world and the word in Greek is indeed *apostele*, from which we have the word apostolic.
- Jesus prays for those throughout the world, of all conditions and all backgrounds, who will believe because of the disciples – a *catholic* community;
- and he prays that they will be *one* as he and the Father are one.

In those few verses, prayed in the white-hot centre of Jesus's moment self-sacrifice, we hear the foundation charter of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and remember that Church is one not because *we* are one but because *Jesus Christ* is one; the Church is holy not because *we* are, but because *Jesus Christ* is holy; the Church is catholic not because *we* embrace all differences, but because *Jesus Christ* is the saviour of all; the Church is apostolic not

because of *our* initiatives but because, as the Father has sent Jesus, so *Jesus sends us*.

This tells us that the more we are focussed on Jesus, and drawn into the mystery of his nature, the more that our concerns for the Church will *cease* to be matters we passionately struggle to decide about and master for ourselves. They will flow directly from our relationship with Jesus, 'to whom be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, on earth as it is in heaven, before all time and now and forever. Amen.' (Jude 1.25).