

“...protect them...”

John was Jesus' closest friend. John's Gospel gives us insight into Jesus' heart and soul. John gives us a concentrated summary of Jesus' teaching and his hopes for the future in chapters 13-17 of the Gospel, sometimes known as Jesus' "farewell address", set between the Last Supper and the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Every year on the Sunday between the Ascension and Pentecost, this last Sunday in Easter, we read a section of John chapter 17. We hear Jesus praying to God the Father, knowing that his work is almost completed. Jesus knows he is leaving, yet his disciples are staying. Jesus' work on earth, will now become the disciples' work on earth.

So, today in verse 11 of Chapter 17, John tells us that Jesus asked God to "protect them", protect the disciples, protect the Church, protect those who follow Jesus in every age in every place. Jesus knows that those who follow his way will need protection from evil. At every baptism, we renounce the reality of evil manifested in three ways: Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.

The Church in every age has confronted the powers of evil: spiritual, political, personal. John's Gospel was written during the late first century period as was the first letter of Peter. Evil was manifested in waves of persecution carried out by the Roman Empire. I Peter tells us "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, lurking for someone to devour. Resist him..."

And we have certainly seen the manifestations of evil last week in Manchester, England, as dozens of innocent victims, some teenagers and children, were killed and injured from a terrorist's bomb. Just days later another act of violence claimed the lives of many Christians once again in Egypt.

Jesus prays for God to help the Church be one, be united. Jesus prays for God to also help the Church to be consecrated in truth. Jesus knows that a community that is united will be protected from evil. Jesus knows that those who know the truth, live by the truth will be protected from all manifestations of evil. Perhaps this is why unity and living by the truth are so difficult.

Jesus calls Satan "a liar and the father of lies ... there is no truth in him." (John 8:44) Jesus told the Pharisees, "a house divided against itself will not stand..." (Matthew 12:25) Evil uses lies. Evil uses division, conflict. Evil tries to use violence and doubt and death.

So, in our own day, we are encouraged to "keep alert" and to be disciplined, especially in our seeking the truth, living the truth, and as we seek unity, community and mutual respect. God does protect us, even when some of us experience evil, even when some of us are killed. God's protection comes with God's truth, with a community stretching through time and across every division to be one in Christ.

I often think of this protection when I visit a hospital or officiate at a funeral, or celebrate a baptism. The truth will make us free. As we live in community, our relationships, our connectivity can face any challenge. Jesus teaches us that evil is real. Jesus shows us that evil can be defeated. Perfect love casts out fear.