

## Jesus' Prayer: John 17 v 15-17

### St. Andrew's 27.10.24

Today's short reading forms the basis of today's message. Short, but as you are about to find out, one of the fundamental foundations in our Christian means of growth and maturity. The key verse is found in the last verse of the reading John 17:17 – Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth and that's the verse we're going to dwell on in the next 20 minutes. Now I have to say it's one of those verses that I skip over when I'm reading John's gospel because I'm never been totally sure of its meaning but I guess our dear Lord decided it was about time that I did and so I was asked to base my talk on those words 'Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth.

Let's put the reading into context. Jesus is praying in the presence of his disciples and these verses are just three of the verses he prays out of 26 verses recorded for us in John's gospel. This is the night of his betrayal. He is moments away from his arrest, his mock trial and later that day the crucifixion. So these are the final words that Jesus prays for his disciples and by extension, for all of us because he goes on in v. 20 'my prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message'.

What Jesus prays grows out of the fact that he is going away. He is entrusting the disciples to his father who, he knows, will care for them every bit as much as he has done himself. He is very much aware that the disciples are at risk. The world, which hates them as it hated Jesus, will threaten and abuse them. They don't belong to the world, but they are going to be sent into it, and they need protecting. What Jesus' followers now need, therefore is to be kept from being pulled back into the world with all its wickedness and rebellion.

In entrusting his followers to his Father, Jesus is asking that they be set apart just as He, during his time of ministry, has been set apart. The word for setting apart is basically the same as the word for 'holy'; but our word 'holy' when applied to people can give a sense of being over-pious which isn't what is meant in the New Testament. And so we come to the first word in our verse Jesus prays 'Sanctify (or set them apart) by your truth; your word is truth.' We are going to be using the word 'sanctification' from now on but what we're talking about is being set apart from the world and Jesus prays in a way that indicates that the word of God is vital to our sanctification. And that means then that the word of God must be primary not only in our lives but in the life of the church. In fact if you want to understand why the church is so weak today, it is due to the lack of hearing and preaching of God's word. The church is anaemic because it's not receiving the very sustenance it needs to be strengthened, to stand firm, to be obedient. And so the flock of Christ throughout the world is being starved of the very thing that is essential to their existence.

So let's look at the process of sanctification or being set apart **from** sin and set apart **for** God. The first stage is the moment we are saved and we believe in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. Our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. We are new creatures and the Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence within us. But we know that, in fact, we are not perfect for the rest of our lives and so our second stage is progressive and takes place for the remainder of our lives. This is

the process of being conformed into the image and likeness of Christ. Of ever increasingly being set apart **from** sin and ever increasingly being set apart **to** God. It's about our spiritual growth and development and becoming spiritually mature. Progressive sanctification takes up the entire time between justification and knowing Jesus as our personal saviour and ultimate glorification when we leave this earth to be with Him. The whole of the Christian life is taken up with progressive sanctification. Jesus is praying in John 17:17 for our progressive sanctification. In Philippians 3:12 Paul writes *'not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me'*.

How does this take place? By means of the truth of the word of God. The role of the Holy Spirit is essential because the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and reveals the truth. Putting it more simply, if you want to be spirit filled, then you need to be filled with the word of God. Colossians 3:16 *let the word of God dwell in you richly....* Let me give you a simple example. An elderly gentleman has recently started coming to our church in Sandwich. He isn't a committed Christian but he is seeking. I recently invited him to come along to a bible study which we are starting. His question was, Will you start with the history of the bible? When I said we wouldn't, he asked how can you believe the bible if you don't know its history? It's the difference between seeing the bible as a book or coming to the bible believing it's the word of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes God's living word.

Yes we are active in our sanctification but don't forget God is also involved. *Philippians 2:12,13 Therefore my dear friends as you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* Stop and think of those words for a moment .... What an amazing thought as we go about our work, is it really God in you who is enabling you to will and to act in accordance with his purposes? If so, then how important it is to keep closely to the truth revealed through His word.

And this carries its own health warning. The process of being transformed into the image of Christ, takes place on God's terms. There are no short cuts. All counterfeit approaches will ultimately fail. There are no fast tracks in sanctification. Sin loves to hinder the process of sanctification and has infiltrated the church with all kinds of false methods. For example, defining holiness by external terms where you are defined by what you don't do (the Pharisees were great at this); or seeking to live the Christian life by the spirit apart from the truth in God's word where you are attributing all kinds of things to the spirit which are either a figment of your imagination or the work of the devil ; or living by one spiritual experience to another and starving in between; or your Christian life is defined by the intensity of your emotions and you effectively make worshipping Jesus all about you; or claiming that you have access to a higher knowledge which is not readily available in the word of God; or blending Christianity with other pagan religions; or believing you are sanctified through sheer achievement of the body Colossians 2:20 *since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: do not handle! Do not Taste! Do not touch!* When you employ a counter method of spiritual growth, God will not bless that. You will be on one hamster wheel to another trying to grow in the Christian life and will end up in the pit of despair or worse - unless you adopt God's method of sanctification. It happens on His terms.

So how does the Word accomplish our sanctification? Here are just some of the ways:

- 1. It is vital to our growth. 1Peter 2:2, 3 *Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*
- 2. It renews the mind. Romans 12:2 *do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*
- 3. It exposes our sin Hebrews 4:12 *for the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*
- 4. It leads to confession Psalm 32:3, 4 *when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.* David was keeping silent about his sin and experienced physical effects – his vitality and vigour fading. The need to regularly confess our sin is a regular reality.
- 5. It purifies our lives. *Psalm 119:9 how can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.*
- 6. It builds us up Acts 20:32 Paul's words to the elders of *Ephesus Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*
- 7. It possesses everything we need 2 Timothy 3:16,17 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

It is no wonder that David prays in Psalm 19 that God's word is more valuable than gold and sweeter than honey.

So what are the implications for us in the prayer that Jesus prayed for us. Well they are fundamental to our personal relationship with God. If our sanctification is of highest importance and there are counterfeit methods then we need to be incredibly discerning. Anything that takes a different route than Christ falls into the category of empty deception. We need to embrace the God ordained means of sanctification; we need to embrace the word of God as central in our lives; there are no fast tracks or short cuts and any other approach to the Christian life will hinder it. We need to reject ideological fortresses which are being raised up against the word of God. Jeremiah refers to the word of God as a hammer and the word of God can obliterate any ideology of the world.

This is our mission in life – that we will grow in holiness and be moulded into the image of Christ. And if we don't know Christ as our saviour and been sanctified by his blood then we can't even start to embark on the journey.

I want to finish with reference to Alice's book 'Treasures in Darkness'. Alice likens our being set apart from the world as a spiritual battle whereby the word of God empowers us to stand and withstand by proclaiming the truth of His word. Alice refers to Paul's description in Ephesians 6 of

our defences against the powers of darkness in this world being like the armour of the Roman soldier. The first thing the soldier would put on which isn't actually a weapon or a piece of defensive armour would be the belt which Paul calls the belt of truth. Google tells us that the soldier would put on the belt first of all and was a vital piece of equipment. It helped to tuck in the clothing worn under the armour; it held the breastplate in place and held bronze plates to protect the lower part of the body; it provided core support so that the soldier remained upright and stable while carrying heavy equipment all day; it was a symbol of status as a Roman soldier and it was considered as a punishment not to wear it and finally it was used as weapon storage for the sword which it kept close to the soldier's side. The belt was worn daily, even if the rest of the armour wasn't worn. Google goes on to say that it was seen as indissoluble unity with the sword. Taking off the belt meant taking off the sword.

All of the armour is defensive with the exception of the soldier's sword which Paul tells us is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. To quote Alice 'as truth is wrapped around us like a belt, it keeps our sword of the Spirit close to our side, whenever we need it. The double mention of truth in the belt and the sword emphasises our need for truth in responding to the world around us and every strategy of the enemy. We guard ourselves with truth and we resist the enemy with truth. Knowing Scripture is not something we should ever opt out of – it is vital. We use the truth of the word of God like a sword, knowing that we have authority in Christ to stand and withstand. That authority is our fire-power and our life's essence as we stand on the word of God.