

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O

Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen**

Today is the seventh Sunday of Easter and we are coming to the end of this joyful Season. On Thursday we have passed the feast of the Ascension of Christ, and next week we will celebrate Pentecost, when in Jerusalem the Holy Spirit descended onto the members of the early Christian community, an event that is seen as the founding moment of the Christian Church. It is at this point in the church calendar that we are invited once more to consider words that originated in very different circumstances. Our Gospel reading today forms the end of Jesus' Farewell Discourse which he addressed to his disciples on the evening of the last Supper, before his arrest, trial and execution. Today's words follow those interpreted during the last two sermons by Matthew and Stephanie.

In those earlier readings we heard Jesus comparing the community around him with an organism, "I am the

vine and you are the branches”. He told the apostles that they had not chosen him, but that he had chosen them, and invited them to abide in his love. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” and “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Today’s words come at the end of that discourse and they consist of a prayer, also known as the High Priestly Prayer, in which Jesus turns to his father, asking him to protect those who had stayed with him. “But now [Father] I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Jesus does not ask for his followers to be taken out of the world, but rather to be protected in the world:

“They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I

sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Jesus sanctified himself by presenting himself to God and by revealing himself to his followers. They were sanctified through this revelation of truth which we find in his word.

It is probably not surprising that the apostles on the eve of his passion did not understand Jesus’s words. Questions by Peter and Philip that evening, in response to the footwashing and to Jesus’ Farewell Discourse illustrate how difficult they found it to grasp his words and symbolic actions. It was Christ himself who after his resurrection explained his earlier words to them, on the way to Emmaus, in the locked room, and by the sea at Tiberias, opening their eyes and minds. And then he left, ascended to heaven, and that’s where we are with them today.

In our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, we find this first Christian community preparing themselves for their very life as God’s people in this world. There were many followers of Jesus who had

witnessed and accompanied him, women and men, but the ones he had addressed in his Farewell Discourse were the twelve. They were the apostles, ‘the ones who are sent out’. If Christ is occasionally referred to as the perfect High Priest, then with the group of twelve apostles he had constituted a council of priests around him. Their number harked back to that of the twelve tribes of Israel, thus again grounding this community firmly in Jewish traditions. But after Judas’ betrayal and suicide there were only eleven left. In our first reading today we find the community filling the gap by electing another man from the wider group of followers who had witnessed Christ. Here, the church is establishing itself as an institution, electing its leaders.

Such an election might look rather worldly, particularly as it involved the casting of lots. At the time however, this was seen as a means to consult God’s will, and, anyway, the forging of an institution is very much part of what it means to live as God’s people in this world. Not that the institution of the twelve apostles was sacred. Significant as the number apparently was for

the first community, it did not remain enshrined. With Paul who had not accompanied Christ, but witnessed him and received his own calling through a vision, a thirteenth apostle would arise and with him an alternative, universal trajectory to priesthood and Christian faith outside the Jewish community.

Here at St Peter's we are also thinking extensively about ourselves as an institution, about the form of our worship in the light of changes that have been forced upon us by pandemic and interregnum, about our offices and officers, and most importantly about the appointment of a new priest. Next week we hold our Annual Parochial Church Meeting and elect a new PCC. We do that every year, but this time the questions that those elected have to face and the wider congregation with them, are particularly challenging. We welcome back users to our crypt; having lost the income of the crypt for an entire year we may have to make financial decisions that may affect our activities. As restrictions are easing we are designing a trajectory towards the resumption of services with singing and no physical distancing. We do all this with new experiences, but

without the guidance of a dedicated full-time vicar. We find ourselves considering, and having to formulate, who we are, how we worship, what we want from a new vicar and how we might appear to those who consider applying for this position. It is not for the first time this year that our own situation relates rather strikingly to the theme of the church calendar.

Most of us would not believe that we can access God's judgment by casting lots, but like the members of the early Christian community we can draw confidence and strength in our decisions from revisiting Christ's Farewell Discourse. John also does this in his letter that we heard as our Second Reading. Both, John's letter and our Gospel reading today tell us that as believing Christians we belong to Christ and have been sanctified through him. If we listen to God's word, love Christ and our neighbour, then, so we are assured, we, individually and as a body of believers, may be in this world, but not from this world, act in truth, and have eternal life, through Christ. **Amen.**