

ASCENSION DAY and the 7th SUNDAY of EASTER

21st May and 24th May 2020

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,

Although we cannot be together in person, we pray that you will help us be together in mind and spirit. May we know your presence with us by your Spirit as we follow this short act of worship, remembering Jesus' ascension back to your eternal presence and the promise of your Holy Spirit to indwell all your followers. We pray in Jesus' name and say out-loud the prayer he taught his disciples, saying,
Our Father, . . .

Bible Reading John 17

'I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one-as you are in my, Father and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.' John 17.20,21

Reflection

Jesus ends his farewell speech to his disciples during their last meal together before he is arrested with a heartfelt prayer. I always find this prayer particularly moving, as Jesus prays for his disciples, rather than himself, even though he knows he is about to face appalling suffering, pain, and death.

This week we are reflecting on this prayer as we remember the Ascension of the risen Jesus into heaven. The disciples must face Jesus leaving them for a second time. I am sure it was no easier than the first time when he said he would be killed. After the utter joy and amazement of his resurrection to new life, to learn that he is leaving them again, this time for good, to return to the Father would have given them renewed grief. Again, they would be feeling of loss and bewilderment and fearful as to what the future will hold.

In our current situation with the possibility of the easing of lockdown, yet the risk of future outbreaks of the Covid-19 virus, we too may be feeling anxious and uncertain about the future. This will be heightened for those who are being shielded, wondering when they will ever be free to see loved ones in the flesh, and for those whose livelihoods are now at risk. We can only guess and hope that the situation will become more positive than it looks at the present. We can pin our hopes on the scientists, to come up with an effective vaccine or in testing, tracing and tracking measures, to prevent and reduce the spread of the infection, but we do not know how effective they will be.

Jesus' prayer speaks into his disciples' fear and uncertainty, giving words of hope and empowerment for what lies ahead. Jesus asks God for the Holy Spirit will be with his followers, not to take them out of the world with its danger, but to enable and empower them as they go about living for God in their lives. Then, most moving of all, he extends his prayer to include not only his followers then, but also for all who will ever believe in him through their message. That includes us!!

Just as Jesus had come into the world to serve God, now he sends his followers of all time to further his ministry of justice, peace, and love. We are to continue to do so today, knowing that the Holy Spirit continues to dwell in us also, enabling us to continue our witness to his love in our lives whatever situation we are in. We may ask God for the Holy Spirit to direct and lead us and trust that God is ultimately in control of the world and is working to bring his realm of peace and wholeness over all the world. Even in these strange times, we *can* see God at work all around us: in the beauty of spring, in acts of human kindness, and in people's desire to help to build a better world. If we trust in God's Spirit then we may be strong and hopeful, with joy in our hearts and live to the glory of God whatever our future days may bring.

Prayer

Loving God,

help us to trust in your watch care over us.

Help us to turn to you for wisdom and strength in these uncertain times.

Let us know that you are the living God, not remote and far away, but one who comes near to us by your Spirit to bring healing and hope during illness and fear.

Guide our leaders, give them wisdom and willingness to seek the wellbeing of all people, particularly those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged.

For yours *is* the power and the glory for ever more. AMEN.