

Sermon for Sunday 17 May 2026 – The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Sunday after Ascension)

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Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10; 1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11; John 17.1-11

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples over 40 days, in Jerusalem, in the upper room, by the Sea of Galilee, and in the mountain in Galilee before finally ascending from the Mount of Olives near Bethany. At the Ascension, the 11 disciples were present and perhaps other followers too. Then, as we heard in Acts, they returned to Jerusalem and gathered again in the upper room, waiting. But what were they waiting for? They were waiting for the gift that Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit. They were waiting to be given courage, wisdom, and strength to speak publicly about all they had seen and heard.

And perhaps that raises a question for us too. How easy do we find it to speak about God or Jesus to others? Many of us feel awkward. We worry about saying the wrong thing or upsetting somebody or being thought strange or old-fashioned. We can do it in this environment, but what about the environments out there? Yet the Christian faith is not simply private. Faith is always something to be lived and shared. And why? Because as Jesus says in today's Gospel, 'This is eternal life, that they know you and the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' Eternal life is not simply life after death. It begins now. It is life in its fullness. And Jesus says that fullness of life comes through knowing God.

But what does it mean to know God? There is a difference between knowing someone and actually really knowing them. We might say we know about our doctor or our solicitor or our friend, but we don't necessarily really know them personally. In the Bible, to know means much more than possessing information. It means relationships, personal, living, trusting relationships. So knowing facts about God is not enough. We can study theology, read books, listen to sermons, and still remain at a distance.

Knowledge alone does not transform us. What changes then in our relationship with God? To know God is to trust God. To speak to God, to listen to God, to allow ourselves to be shaped by God. And this is not something we achieve purely by effort. We often imagine that we can discover God by our own wisdom, or perhaps through nature, beauty, and life experience. And of course creation can awaken wonder, but nature alone is ambiguous. Human experience is fragile and shifting. No, ultimately God must reveal himself to us.

And Christians believe God has done exactly that in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, 'No one comes to me unless the Father draws them.' Before we ever begin searching for God, God is already searching for us. Before we ever turn towards God, God has already turned towards us. Often when people come to faith, they later realise that God had been quietly present throughout their whole lives. Not absent, not indifferent, but present. Calling, drawing, and waiting.

And this brings us to today's extraordinary Gospel reading from John 17. In this passage, we are allowed to overhear something remarkable, a conversation between Jesus and his Father. Jesus is praying, and just before his arrest, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In a way, we go back in time, but this is often called Jesus's High Priestly Prayer. There he is looking up to heaven, and what is striking is this: Jesus is praying for his disciples and for us. He prays, 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.'

This is and will be deeply comforting. Jesus knows he is about to leave his disciples physically. He knows they will soon face confusion, opposition and fear. And so he entrusts them to the Father. He prays for their protection, not protection from difficulty, because the disciples will indeed face hardship.

Peter reminds us in 1 Peter chapter 4, 'Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is about to take place among you.' Following Jesus does not exempt us from suffering. In fact, sometimes it appears to make life harder. To live faithfully in a confused or cynical world can be costly. To stand for truth, mercy, holiness, and hope is not always popular. And sometimes Christians are mocked, dismissed, or totally misunderstood. The disciples knew this, the early church knew this, and we know it too. But the good news is this: we do not face the world alone. Jesus prays for us, and the Father hears him. And that is the great reassurance of this Gospel.

The very fact that we are allowed to hear this prayer tells us something important. Jesus's prayer is not uncertain. He is not making a desperate request that may or may not be answered. He is praying according to the Father's will. So when Jesus asked the Father to guard, sustain, and keep his people, we can trust that this is exactly what God is doing, even when we cannot see it. Jesus says, 'Protect them by the power of your name.' In Scripture, God's name is never just a label. God's name means God's presence, character, authority, and power. To be kept in God's name is to be held in God himself, held in his faithfulness, held in his love, and held in his holiness.

There is a wonderful phrase here Jesus calls God Holy Father. This is the only place in the New Testament where those exact words appear — Holy and Father — both transcendence, a divine

existence, and intimacy. God is utterly holy, beyond us, greater than all we can imagine. And yet through Christ we may call him Father, and that is the privilege of the Christian faith. Not merely believing that God exists — but being drawn into relationship with a loving God.

So here we are like the disciples between Ascension and Pentecost, in a season of waiting. Jesus has ascended, the Spirit is promised, the disciples are gathered in prayerful expectation. And perhaps that is a good word for the Church today. We can become very busy with programmes, projects, strategies, committees, and endless organisational concerns. Important though these may be, they can sometimes distract us from the heart of faith. The heart of faith is not an endless activity. It is a relationship — knowing God, loving God, being open to the Spirit of Grace. And to be open to the Spirit of God.

As someone once said, 'To fall in love with God is the greatest romance. To seek him is the greatest adventure. And to find him is the greatest human achievement.' And that is what the disciples are learning in the Upper Room now, while they were waiting. Before mission comes waiting, before speaking comes prayer, and before action comes surrender. And perhaps we need that reminder too.

There is a lovely image from C S Lewis in 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. The children enter what appears from the outside to be a small, shabby building. But once inside, they discover an immense and glorious space. Lucy says, 'Oh, it's bigger in the inside than on the outside.' And another character replies, 'Yes, something like that once happened on Earth in a stable at Bethlehem.' A tiny stable contained something far greater than it appeared. The child born there carried with him, with himself, the life of the world. And so it is with Christ. In Jesus, the fullness of God came among us through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The world has been changed, and now by the Holy Spirit that same divine life is given to us.

So as we wait for Pentecost, let us wait expectantly. Let us seek not merely to know about God but truly to know him. Let us trust that Christ prays for us still, and let us be ready when the Spirit comes afresh to speak with courage of the hope that is within us for this eternal life, to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for our sake. Amen.