

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In John chapter 17 Jesus is asking God for protection for his followers.

But what sort of protection is Jesus asking for?

1). Wouldn't it be great if Jesus were asking God to protect His followers from all illness and infirmity?

'The Faith Movement' believes that we need not suffer illness. They quote Isaiah 63 v 5. 'By His wounds we are healed,' to back up their belief.

Pete Greig in his wonderful book, 'God On Mute', tells of a friend who made the 'faith healing tele-evangelists' his role models. He told Pete that God had miraculously healed his back pain. He then went on to explain that it was just the symptoms that he couldn't seem to get rid of.

When I felt at my worst with leukaemia some well meaning Christians advised me not to have chemotherapy as that was showing my lack of faith in God. I was reminded that Jesus suffered to heal me of my illness. All I had to do was to believe and claim my healing. Others thought I must be angry with God for not protecting me from getting cancer.

I felt neither anger, nor that I was lacking in faith.

If the 'faith boys' are right, why didn't sick Christians in the Bible claim healing? Trophimus was sick. Epaphroditus was ill and almost died. Paul himself in Galatians 4 had a nasty eye illness that incapacitated him and a strange thorn in the flesh that kept him humble. Unlike some, I am not convinced that the thorn was his wife! I feel sure it was some recurring illness maybe similar to migraine.

So I guess Jesus was not asking God to protect His followers from illness or infirmity.

2). Wouldn't it be great if Jesus were asking God to protect His followers from all violence and physical suffering?

I, like many of you was shocked back in March 1986 when I heard about a gang of burglars breaking into the Ealing Vicarage. The Vicar, Michael Saward, was beaten up and his daughter raped. If Jesus was asking God to protect His followers from violence, where was He that lunchtime?

Nearly 2000 years ago we know that the Emperors Nero and Domitian caused immense suffering for the Early Church.

250 years later Diocletian's ruthless cruelty towards Christians was even worse.

During those 300 years, I wonder if any of the believers questioned where the protection that Jesus asked for was?

Maybe like Paul they believed it was an honour and a privilege to suffer for Christ, just as Christ had suffered for them.

So I guess Jesus was not asking God to protect His followers from pain and violence.

3). Wouldn't it be great if Jesus were asking God to protect His followers from a painful death.

At 7 years old I read about Jim Elliot and 4 other missionaries that were viciously killed in the Ecuador jungle as they tried to share Jesus with the Auca Indians. Even as a child I wondered why Jesus did not protect His missionaries. Why did He allow them to suffer such a horrific death. I was even more amazed to read that his wife Elizabeth and daughter Valerie not only forgave these murderous Indians but also went back and continued working among them. Not surprisingly, many became Christians.

Even today we know that many of our brothers and sisters in other countries are being persecuted and martyred for their faith.

So I guess Jesus was not asking God to protect His followers from a painful death.

4). So what exactly was Jesus asking Father God to protect His followers from?

A line from the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6 : 13) that Jesus repeats in John 17 contains the answer:

*'Deliver us', not from evil but, 'from the evil one.'*

Jesus stressed that his followers no longer belong to this world. God's enemy is now also our enemy. Peter tells us that, *'the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.'*

We certainly need God's protection. Protection from the evil one himself.

Jesus said, *'My prayer is not to take them out of the world'*. Being, *'in the world'*, seems to mean - whilst in the world. Those who follow Jesus will not be exempt from illness, violence or a painful death.

What Jesus was praying was a paradox.

4). He was saying that the safest place to be on earth, where God's protection is guaranteed, is to be amongst those who could hurt us the most. Our commission, as was the Apostles, is to share the love and good news of Jesus with those who at present, live in darkness having been blinded by the prince of darkness.

**This is where Christians will find spiritual protection, but as martyrs throughout history have proven, rarely physical protection.**

When the evil one throws all kinds of hardship and testing at us, Jesus asks God to protect us and to help us to stay strong in our faith until the very end.

Like many Bible heroes in difficult times, we all question God. We may even ask the question, how can God protect us?

What does a God high up in heaven know about suffering, pain and even death?

To answer this let me finish with an anonymous story I first heard in the 1970's and have never forgotten. You may have heard it before, but it's helpful to hear again. It may also help us in our Lent reflections.

## **5). THE LONG SILENCE.**

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly - not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

Can God judge us? "How can He know about suffering?" snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror---beatings---torture---death!"

In another group an African American boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched--- for no crime but being black".

In another crowd, a pregnant school girl with sullen eyes. "Why should I suffer?" she murmured, "It wasn't my fault".

Far across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He permitted in His world.

'How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred.

What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God lives a pretty sheltered life', they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most.

A Jew, an African-American, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child.

In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to judge, he must endure what they had endured.

Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man!

Let him be born a Jew.

Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted.

Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it.

Let him be betrayed by his closest friends.

Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge.

Let him be tortured.

At last let him see what it is like to be terribly alone. Then let him die.

Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

As each leader pronounced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the great throngs of people.

But when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence.

No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly they all knew.... God had already served His sentence.