

John 17:6-19

Benedictus Contemplative Church

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A few years ago I was getting some heart palpitations, so I went for a routine electro cardiogram. Except it turned out not to be routine. The GP immediately booked me in the next morning for an ultra-sound on my heart. I think it was probably the urgency with which she booked me in which scared me the most. It all turned out to be OK. But that 24 hours I sat in that horrible place of seriously considering my mortality for the first time in my life. I'm sure anyone who has faced these kinds of test results or has faced cancer or is living with cancer has had this kind of experience.

This experience might give us some empathy for how Jesus must have felt as he approached the likelihood of his own death – one characterised by extreme violence. We're not told much in John's gospel about Jesus's inner psychological state as he approached his death, but we are told a lot about his actions – particularly the way in which he prays for his closest companions. Today's reading is taken from a section of the gospel commonly called Jesus's high priestly prayer. The prayer is "Priestly" in the sense of Jesus praying TO God FOR those he is leaving. We may wish to think for a moment about what our prayer to God would be, for those we love, if we were facing our immanent death. For example, would we pray that, after we had gone, that our loved ones would be happy? Or Successful? Or free of pain and suffering?

Interestingly, Jesus does not pray for *any* of these things. In the passage we heard tonight Jesus prays

**"Protect them** by the power of your name" (v11)...and

he prays that they **"may have the full measure of his joy within them"**.

Protection for his disciples does not mean *not* protection from suffering or dying. All the disciples will eventually die, and some of them will be crucified at a relatively young age. So what does Jesus prayer for protection mean? My interpretation of the prayer is that Jesus perceives that there is a fate **worse** than death, and this 'fate worse than death' is what Jesus prays his disciples will be protected from.

JK Rowling reflects on a 'fate worse than death' fate rather hilariously in one of the Harry Potter novels. Hermione Granger is getting very upset with her friends for an act of skulduggery. Hermione says *"Now, if you two don't mind, I'm going to bed before either of you come up with another clever idea to get us killed. Or worse, expelled"*.

Ron thinks that Hermione has got her priorities wrong. But Hermione is right on the money. There IS a fate worse than death, and this is what Jesus is concerned about protecting his disciples from.

Jesus prays that his disciples may be **protected from the evil one (v.15)**. Why is Jesus so concerned about this? Because the work of evil is to *expel* others – through blaming, shaming, annihilation, killing. In short, the work of the evil one is *destruction*. We watched this evil of destruction at work in the killings which occurred at a Jewish music festival. And we are grieving this destruction on an appalling scale in Gaza, not far where Jesus himself was crucified, ironically by his brothers and sisters in his own faith community.

**In contrast to the destruction of the evil one, which is the human disposition towards expelling people, destroying people, Jesus prays that his disciples may be made Holy by the TRUTH of God's word. What John means by the 'truth of God's Word', is not holiness formed by some blind obedience to a text that makes one fee; rather self-righteously holy, but by faithfulness to the WORD who is a person. God's primary Word – God's primary communication to the world, is Jesus.**

This work of being made holy (which means, to be like God), stands in contrast to the work of the evil one, which is to expel and destroy. This work of being made holy is worked out within the day to day life of our communities, families, workplaces and churches. Jesus is not praying that we become holy by being spirited away onto some esoteric cloud where everyone is happily meditating all day. Jesus sends us INTO the world but not *part* OF the world.

So what does this mean? To be IN the world but not OF the world? (v.15-17)

In John's gospel, the word "world" is not referring to the planet we call earth in all its beauty. The word "World" refers to the way in which human cultures can so often be formed through the process of expulsion which is the work of the evil one who Jesus refers to. **An aspect of human culture** is not just its beautiful uniqueness (which is a gift of God), but the way culture can violently set itself against others. Groups have a tendency to define themselves by who they are NOT...by who they expel.

- I am republican NOT democrat
- I am Suni NOT Shia
- I am Protestant NOT catholic
- I am a labour voter not a liberal voter
- I am a social justice advocate, not a conservative hater

and there are dozens of others. How often have we caught ourselves saying, 'thank God I'm not like him or her'.

Once we forge our primary identity as a cultural group, we become very prone to demonising others who are not like us. We are right. They are wrong. We are not violent. They are violent. So we will expel you on our terms. If I do that, I start to look like a **child of destruction rather than a child of God**

So Jesus prays that we may be saved from THAT fate, a fate worse than death, and be brought into the joy of a different logic. Jesus prays that we may find a transforming identity which transcends human cultural belonging. Jesus prays that we may be formed by the Logos (John 1:1-14). The logic of crucified love.

The passage today begins with the words, “I (that is, Jesus) have revealed you (that is, God the Father) to those whom you gave me OUT of the world”. Jesus has REVEALED what God is like. And that revelation is something active. As the great theologian Karl Barth put it, ‘God IS what God does’. God IS one who liberates us from OUT of the world’s violent logos, and INTO an alternative reality.

The LOGOS (the ‘meaning’ or ‘character’ of God, as one who liberates) has come into the world, full of grace and truth, and the world did not receive him (it expelled him, it crucified him) because the world’s logic did not comprehend him. The ‘world’ could not comprehend the logic of self-giving reconciling, liberating love, and so it expelled him..

Except for a small group of people who DO understand. Who do get it...at least at some level - not a perfect understanding, but a *sufficient* understanding. God, the Father, sends Jesus into the world to make the Father known. Jesus makes the Father known to this little group of people which God has entrusted to him – for a very short period (just one year according to John). Now Jesus is returning to the Father and sends this little group of people which God entrusted to him....this insignificant little group of Hobbits...he sends them *into* the world, but not to be OF the world. This little bunch of powerless hobbits, otherwise known as disciples, and now living IN him...living IN a different logic. This alternative logic is gradually setting them free in order to throw their rings of power into the lake of fire in Mount Doom rather than being tempted to wield their rings of power in acts of expulsion and destroying others.

And, guess what? These disciples will be hated, just as Jesus is hated. Mmm. That sounds like fun doesn’t it?

Well...it is true that this particular path of living the alternative story of God’s logos CAN be life threatening but Jesus also prays that it be **joyful**. And it often IS joyful because once our identity is rooted in Jesus it is not vulnerable to the passing fads of group identity. We know who we are – beloved children of God – and nothing can destroy that, not even physical death. We become rooted in a peace which is not something we have to heroically create. We are united to what Jesus calls a life giving vine. In this fine nothing and no one is lost, except evil itself.

Not even Judas is lost. The character of Judas could be any of us when we get consumed by disappointment and lose hope in the goodness of God. Judas is possessed by the forces of violent scapegoating, as most of us do when on those occasions when we get swept long by communal hate. Spiritually, it could be said that Judas temporarily becomes a *Son of Destruction rather than a Son of God*. But there is much more to Judas than destruction. Judas the child of God who Jesus called and mentored and loved can never fall out of God’s embrace but the Son of Destruction which possessed him is certainly done away with.

Jesus is remaking us little band of Hobbits by grafting us into a vine not of our own making – we are grafted into a different kind of narrative of what life is about and how abundant life is found and lived. The African American churches spoke to jumping on the gospel train, because the gospel train would take them somewhere completely different to the trains of the slave train. Thinking of this gospel train, I suddenly remembered a particular photograph

which was taken when our family visited Disneyland in Paris. So I'm going to wind this reflection up by sharing the photo of me and our daughter Hannah on a roller coaster.



I invite us to imagine this roller coaster as a gospel train – a gospel roller coaster – because this is what life often feels like. This gospel roller coaster is full of joy and sometimes full of terror. This gospel roller coaster sometimes feels like death and tears. Sometimes it is elation and laughter. But the ups and downs are all incorporated within the unbreakable love of God. God takes us on this roller coaster journey of life. There is no where on this roller coaster than Jesus has not been, including violent death. If you look very closely, you will see Jesus sitting there alongside Hannah and me. He is laughing with us...and sometimes he is crying with us. But in both laughter and tears, one thing is certain, this particular roller coaster is freeing us, liberating us through a different kind of narrative than the world's narratives of destruction. On this roller coaster we inhabit a different story - not a story of expulsion but a story of the peace and reconciliation of all things – the highs and the lows – the tears and the laughter. And one thing is certain. This roller coaster is taking us home.

This is the prayer that Jesus is praying for his friends on the eve of his departure.