



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Seventh Sunday of Easter

**Acts 1.15-17, 21-26**

**John 17. 6-19**

Last week we looked at what I said was one of my favourite passages from St. John's gospel, the passage which had at its heart Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' I said that this passage was part of what is known as 'the farewell discourse' chapters 14-17 in which Jesus teaches his eleven disciples immediately after his Last Supper with them. The passage last week was from John 15.9-17, this week we have moved on to 17. 6-19. This last teaching of Jesus is packed full and meant to be read as a whole. To take a piece of writing out of context is always hard because we simply do not know what went before. Sometimes, as here, the argument or teaching flows throughout and one passage really is dependent on the one before; so it is good to read it all if we are to come to a full understanding.

Imagine then that you were one of the disciples sitting in the dimly lit upper room having just shared a meal with Jesus, the last one- though at that time you had no idea. Judas has left though you don't know why. In the flickering lamp light Jesus begins to talk, to teach just as he has done for the last three years, but not in the same way, the word pictures, 'I am the true vine' and so on are still there but not the parables. Jesus is speaking more plainly even if parts are hard to understand. It is unbroken teaching.

The part that we are looking at this week is Jesus' prayer to his Father for the disciples. Tom Wright mentioned a performance he had seen of a man reciting or really performing John's gospel. He said that at this point chapter 17 he had knelt down in prayer. It might have been the same performance I saw. It was at Lichfield Cathedral. I don't remember him kneeling but I do remember being profoundly moved by it and having a far greater understanding because it was a continuum. The words and the arguments flowed unbroken and the actor was so fine that nuance of meaning through expression became much clearer. I wish that I had the opportunity to see it again especially after writing these Reflections.

Jesus begins chapter 17 with these words,

<sup>17.1</sup> 'After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup>since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.'

It is a direct address to his Father – it is prayer and the passage continues in the same vein. What has happened prior to this passage during the ‘farewell discourse’?

What follows directly from our reading last week is this,

<sup>18</sup> ‘If the world hates you be aware that it hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup>If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup>Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.’

There is a direct link with our passage because of Jesus’ reference to the world as hating the disciples and that when he is no longer with them persecution will follow. Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to strengthen them with the power of God. They will need this if they are to do the job they have been given against the background of huge opposition.

<sup>16.1</sup> ‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. <sup>2</sup>They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. <sup>3</sup>And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. <sup>4</sup>But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.’

There is no beating about the bush. Jesus is clear about what they will have to face. He explains what will soon happen to him. <sup>16</sup> ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.’ He will leave them and return to his Father. The disciples have their commission; they must carry on the work of Jesus and take God’s word out into the world. Jesus by his death and resurrection has begun the new creation. His followers; all who turn to him must work to bring that new creation to fruition. That is a tough enough responsibility for the eleven to carry but they will be persecuted for his sake. The words ‘whoever wishes to be my follower must deny himself take up his cross and follow me’ are not metaphorical, for most of them this will be reality. Because Jesus is ‘going away’ from them then he can send the Advocate, the power from on high. Without this they could do nothing. With it they have not only strength for the task but the authorisation and yes the power of the Holy Spirit working within them in Jesus’ name.

Jesus begins his prayer for those first disciples. He has taught them all he can; he has passed on to them the word of God. They have accepted him and accepted his words as God’s truth.

<sup>17.6</sup> ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. Jesus knows what these followers and in fact all those who follow him may have to face. His prayer is for the protection of God for them and by extension for us too.

<sup>9</sup> ‘I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ‘

What Jesus is doing here is talking about relationship. As Jesus and his Father are joined in love; so the disciples are part of that love. That is because of their belief and trust in Jesus and because they live by his word.

<sup>10</sup> ‘All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.’

The word emphasised throughout this passage is the ‘world’. This has been misinterpreted as the disciples as being not part of the world. I remember reading a saying about mission once which was

quite forceful, 'A man with his head in the clouds is of no earthly use.' Well that behaviour is not true of the disciples nor is this what Jesus means. These eleven men are very much grounded in reality but they have chosen the way of Christ. That way is not the 'way of the world.' let's go back for a minute to the wonderful beginning of John's gospel.

<sup>10</sup> 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

The use of the 'world' in this passage changes, at times it simply means the earth and Jesus' earthly existence. At no time does it mean that there is anything wrong with God's creation. How could there be; he made it. Jesus was there at the beginning, 'all things came into being through him.' The other use of the word 'world,' means that people have turned from God and chosen, if you like, the way of the world. Think of the old expression, 'sin, the world and the devil.' Jesus came to the world exactly because of that. He died and rose again to restore humanity's relationship with God. He came that 'all might have life and have it more abundantly.'

The disciples followed him; we know others turned to him in those first years of his ministry. Most did not, it is in that sense he uses the 'world' to represent those who rejected him and turned their back on him. It was because of the world's sin that he walked the road to Calvary.

Now Jesus' earthly work is complete, he has to face the final agony and through it complete his triumph over evil at his resurrection. He will be with them for a time after the resurrection but his time on this earth will soon be over.

'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. <sup>12</sup>While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.'

His prayer then is that God will protect these followers in all that they will have to face. They are in the world but the accepted ways of the world are no longer appropriate. They have turned and followed Jesus' way. While Jesus was with them he protected them. Now they will be without him and they will need God's protection. They will need his strengthening so that what they have to face they will not face alone, Jesus' prayer is for the power from on high to be with them. It is also for unity among them.

Jesus did not lose one of them only 'the one destined to be lost.' One thread which connects our reading from the gospel and Acts is the loss and betrayal of Jesus by Judas. So much has been written about that and a huge source of debate is why Judas behaved as he did. Was it disillusionment with Jesus because he didn't do what Judas expected, because Jesus' way was not Judas'? Was it jealousy, was it anger? We will never know. The other huge question is was Judas foreordained to betray Jesus? I have a problem with that. Judas had free will. It is one of the fundamental gifts of God to us. Go right back to the beginning, to the story of Adam and Eve. It's all about free will; they chose to go their own way not God's and catastrophe follows. It is what happens throughout the bible, the faithful follow God's way others turn their back on him. What is constant is God's love for humanity ultimately shown in the life and death of Jesus. We know that the cross was in the cradle – and that 'he was 'obedient to death, even death on a cross.' We know that Jesus came into the world destined to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Evil is rife, betrayal was foreordained but Judas chose the path of evil; he chose it of his own free will.

<sup>13</sup>But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. <sup>14</sup>I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>15</sup>I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.'

Jesus will rise again he will appear to his followers but at the ascension he will leave this world and return to God. The disciples are in this world and the world will persecute them because they are against evil and the accepted norms. They preach the name of Jesus; they will proclaim the one whom the priests and rulers had handed over to Pilate to condemn. Jesus' prayer is that God will protect them. Protect them from the world but also from the evil one. Judas has already chosen that path. Peter will be shaken by fear and deny him, the others will run away but they have chosen the path of Jesus and evil will, unlike Judas, have no power over them. Their steadfast proclamation of the gospel may lead to persecution and death as it has for so many of his followers but God is with them. They will never be alone and they will never be lost. – Neither indeed will we.

This next part of the passage is wonderful.

<sup>17</sup>'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

These people are sanctified, set apart from the world –to make something holy means to set apart for God. Think of the word sanctuary – part of church, the holiest place because the altar of God is there. So in the past people would go and claim sanctuary.

Jesus is making these men holy because they take out and live out his word. These men and all his followers are set apart and sanctified in the truth. That's another word that rings throughout the passage. What the world sees as truth – to quote Pilate, 'what is truth?' is NOT what a Christian sees as truth; or indeed any person who follows their conscience. No, truth is not something that can be manipulated it is embedded in the word and teaching of Jesus. I love this, again from John – 'the truth will set you free.' It is an excellent maxim and rule for life.

It is here at verse 19 that our passage ends but the prayer continues,

<sup>20</sup> 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'

Here is Jesus' prayer for the world. Indeed for all who turn to him for all who believe in him. His prayer is for us. Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it. John 12. 47. His words of life are for everyone who chooses to accept him and his relationship of love with God. That last part of the passage places us firmly within God's love; as Jesus is in God so are we. What a wonderful prayer and promise. That's what I mean when I say God is as close as our own breathing.

Our passage from Acts last time was from Chapter 5, the baptism of Cornelius and his family and friends. Now we are back at Acts 1. It links with the passage we have just studied and occurs just after the ascension of Jesus. Here then are the disciples they have just witnessed the ascension and return from Olivet to the upper room. What we are told they did then is central.

<sup>14</sup> 'All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.'

They have been told to wait for the power from on high. Prayer is at the centre of their lives as they await the coming of the promised Advocate. They have been present at the resurrection

appearances but now Jesus is no longer with them. They are however a community of believers together. That is important; they have each other. They are the family of Christ.

Our passage begins where Peter addresses the new believers, <sup>1,15</sup> 'In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people)' as ever Luke is exact. Peter explains that the scripture tells again and again that the Messiah will be betrayed as indeed Jesus has said in the passage we have just looked at. It must have been such a blow for the disciples when in the garden they saw Judas lead the guards to Jesus. When the cold light of the betrayer's action made them see him clearly for what he was or had turned into. He had lived with them, listened to teaching with them, kept the common purse. They had trusted him as Jesus had. It always makes me think of psalm 41

<sup>9</sup> 'Yea, even mine own familiar friend, whom I trusted who did also eat of my bread, hath laid great wait for me.'

Now the first job of the disciples is to choose a replacement for Judas. Jesus chose twelve as his first followers – twelve must be the number. Interestingly the Celtic monks when setting out on mission would have the leader and twelve followers after the pattern set by Jesus.

So how were they to choose – obviously by lot. To us lottery means pure chance; not so in the biblical tradition. In the Old and New Testaments lots were cast for many important decisions.

Proverbs 16:33 states,

<sup>33</sup>'The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone.'

That is the point; their deep belief was that with prayer God would decide the outcome. We all know the story of the sailors casting lots and throwing Jonah overboard but there are many examples, I looked a few of them up – for example the division of land among the twelve tribes of Israel: 'Joshua then cast lots for them in Shiloh in the presence of the Lord, and there he distributed the land to the Israelites according to their tribal divisions.' Joshua 18:10. Also the distribution of priestly offices in the Temple was decided by casting lots. I Chronicles 24

So now when there is a crucial decision to be made of course the disciples trust in God and cast lots. Firstly however there are only two chosen candidates. The stipulation seems to be that they were followers of Jesus from the first days of his ministry.

<sup>21</sup>'So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.'

Secondly the chosen person must be a witness of the resurrection, of course he must. When they take out the good news of Jesus Christ they will be able to witness to what they have seen with their own eyes.

<sup>23</sup>'So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

<sup>24</sup>'Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup>to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.'

Notice the central point they pray – address God directly 'Lord you know everyone's heart. Show us which one you have chosen'

We don't know anything about these two people. I must say I feel sorry for Justus who no doubt was a good and worthy man. However it is Matthias who is chosen. I didn't know anything about him apart from this passage so I looked him up. After he was chosen by lot he does not appear again in

the New Testament. There are traditions about his ministry; the Greek tradition was that he took the gospel to Cappadocia. We will never know but one supposes he became a true and faithful disciple. Friday incidentally was St. Matthias' day.

Jesus has said that those who follow him are members of his family and loved by him as he is loved by God. As the Godhead is a community of love so should our churches be.

We are all chosen and called by God, to the 'priesthood of all believers.'

Like that of those first disciples it is our calling and our commission is to live out Jesus' teaching. We thank God that like those first disciples God guides us in our calling through prayer.

*'Will you come and follow you if I but call your name?'* John L Bell.

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