

## **Easter 7 John 17 Being Kept Safe in the World Robert Innes 24 May 2009**

By the standards of the average spiritual guru, Jesus may be rather a disappointment. He gives us very few spiritual techniques. We know *that* he prayed. But we know very little about *how* he prayed or *what* he prayed. We get very little practical instruction on prayer from Jesus – no meditation exercises, no mantras, no Lotus position. There is the Lord's prayer of course. There are the words he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mostly, though, the New Testament records only a few snippets of Jesus's actual prayers in the gospels. With one exception. And that exception is the gospel reading we heard today. John chapter 17 is the only chapter in the whole Bible which takes the form of a prayer of Jesus. And so, it is a chapter which to which we should attend particularly carefully. By reading these words we are eavesdropping on an intimate conversation between the Son and the Father. It is sometimes called 'The Great Prayer'. It is, I think, a very moving, comforting and powerful chapter. And we are going to spend a few minutes together meditating upon it today.

The prayer is set in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. It's a deeply significant moment. For three long chapters, Jesus has been addressing his disciples, giving them his final instructions. Now, at the beginning of chapter 17 we read that he looked towards heaven and prayed to his heavenly Father. The prayer is a summary at the end of his earthly ministry of all that he has come to do. It's a prayer in three parts: he first prays for himself, then for his disciples, and then for all believers. And it's the middle and longest part that forms our gospel reading today – verse 6 to 19, Jesus prays for his disciples at the end of his ministry. It is time to say goodbye. And Jesus commends those closest to him to God in prayer.

A very good friend of mine in England decided to accept a clergy post a long way away, in Hong Kong. He had served 10 years in his local church, his two children were now grown up and through college, and he decided that now was the time for something new. The apartment he was moving to in Hong Kong was much smaller than his vicarage in England, so he and his wife had to sell nearly all his furniture and many of their personal possessions. He said goodbye to the city and region that was his home and that he loved. But what for him was the most difficult thing about moving to the other side of the world, to the Far East? It was, of course, saying goodbye to his children. Though they were grown up, they were still in their early twenties. They needed help and guidance in finding places to live, in settling into jobs, and making their way in adult life. And, so my friend and his wife did worry terribly about whether their son and daughter would be alright.

It is this same sense of concern for those left behind that we encounter in Jesus's Great prayer. Jesus felt a strong, shepherdly sense of responsibility for his disciples. So the major theme of the prayer is that the disciples will be *protected*. Verse 11: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world; protect them by the power of your name. While I was with them I protected them." And verse 15: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." Jesus knew exactly what it was like to be hated and hunted down. After all, he had been betrayed at that very supper by one of his own disciples. As the world had hated Jesus so it will hate his followers. They are at risk, and he prays for their protection.

The risks to the disciples arise from their ambiguous position. They are sent into the world, but they don't belong to the world. They are called to live in the world but they are not to be of the world. The 'world' in John's gospel is a shorthand for the human community as it has rebelled against God, as it has chosen darkness not light, as it has organised itself in opposition to its creator. Seen from *this* world, Jesus has come from another place. So, indeed have his disciples. They don't belong there. It is not *this* world that most deeply shapes them. Their identity, rootedness, values and beliefs come from somewhere else...they have been, as it were, born again from above. They now have to be protected from the world with all its wickedness and rebellion .

The risks to the disciples of Jesus could be straightforwardly physical risks. Jesus himself was put to death, as we know, were his leading disciples. Those physical risks continue today. There are many parts of the world, particularly in Muslim countries where it is physically dangerous to be a Christian. And even in Western countries many of us will have been at some time or another on the receiving end of abuse because of our faith.

But the risks Jesus has in mind are not so much external threats as internal collapse. So at the end of this section of his prayer he pleads "may they be sanctified by the truth". He prays for his disciples to have the moral and spiritual integrity that will prevent them being corrupted or eroded by the pressures of the world. The diseases of which we are most afraid are those where a person's one body starts to work against itself. So, also, it is the subversion of the human soul from within that is the most dangerous.

Indeed, how quickly and devastatingly a person's life can unravel. Maybe those of us who live overseas are particularly aware of the fragility of our lives. Relational health, moral health, spiritual health, financial health and physical health can all evaporate quickly. Many of us will have seen that happen to someone we know. We talk about people's lives "falling apart". It's as if the creative energy that goes into making someone is somehow undone, and the person is 'unmade'. And when I have seen that happening to someone else I think, "well there but for the grace of God go I".

So Jesus prays that his disciples will be consecrated, made holy, in the truth. Being holy in this sense is connected with being 'whole', having a robust integrity. There's a lovely illustration in C.S. Lewis's book "The Great Divorce" of the difference between the inhabitants of heaven and the inhabitants of hell. Those who live in heaven have real solidity whereas those who live in heaven are shadowy, wispy characters – you can virtually see through them. "They are like the chaff..." says today's psalm. So when the inhabitants of hell have a day trip to heaven they don't like the place: they find the light too strong and the grass makes their feet bleed when they walk on it. Our model for holiness is Jesus himself. Not someone who hides away in a monastery but a person who is out there mixing with all sorts of people, conveying healing with his hands, bringing peace with his words, demonstrating in his own being the power and purposes of God. Yet doing all this without in any way being corrupted or led astray by those with whom he interacts, however dodgy or difficult those people are.

The Great prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17 is for the first disciples. But there is some evidence that St. John in his recording of the prayer has mixed some of his own words with the words of Jesus, so that a prayer originally written just for 11 disciples in the Upper Room became a prayer addressed to the early church. And the prayer has been used since by generations of pastors and Christian leaders so that they can pray in Jesus own words for those in their care.

And, actually by changing the words just a little, it can become a prayer that each of us can use for ourselves and for those whom we love. Just substitute “Jesus” for “I” and “me” for “them” and the prayer becomes our own. So it becomes: “Holy Father, protect us by the power of your name, the name you gave Jesus...sanctify me in the truth; as you sent Jesus into the world, so you send me into the world.”

I began by saying that Jesus gave us very few techniques for prayer. But here is something you might try, especially if you feel especially in need of God’s protection at the moment. Takes this prayer and re-write it in the first person as your own. And then pray it for yourself.

There is a huge difference, isn’t there, between listening to a piece of music on a CD and being part of choir or orchestra that is performing it. Listening to music as part of the audience is fine. But when you sing or play with others – well then the music comes from within you as well as from outside you. Then you start to feel a part of the music as well as a spectator listening to the music. So this prayer is one that we are invited to join in; we are invited to enter in a spiritual sense the relationship between the Father and the Son and to join in with their words to each other.

The goal of Jesus prayer is given in verse 13, and it is that we his disciples may have a full measure of joy within us. Joy is a consequence of unity and harmony with God and with other people. Jesus never promises that his people will always be happy, because human life contains a mixture of happiness and sadness, from which Christians are not exempt. But Jesus does pray for and promise *joy*. Joy is concerned with gladness; exultation, exhilaration. It is a deep feeling of belonging and purpose and delight in life. Joy is something we can’t create for ourselves. We can’t manufacture feelings of joy – this emotion is a gift to us, from our Lord. Of course we all express joy in different ways depending on our temperaments, but an authentic Christian life will know something about this most precious and delightful quality. One spiritual writer has described joy as a “sudden stab of intense consciousness”. Real joy he said “must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.” Joy leads us beyond itself to the desire and longing for God.

To conclude, in John chapter 17, we are presented with one of the most solemn and moving chapters in scripture, the only chapter that records in full length the prayer life of Jesus. In this prayer, Jesus prays that the 11 disciples, and beyond them all of his followers, would be protected by God, and sanctified by God in their lives in the world. It is a prayer that we are invited to make our own, to echo Jesus prayer with our own prayers, so that amidst all the changes and chances of this world, our hearts may truly be fixed in God, where alone true joys are to be found.