



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 12 May 2024

Easter 7

The Curate will preach at St John's

After the Ascension the disciples are in a state of transition. The Jesus they knew on earth is no longer with them. Yet they have his promise of belonging even more fully to God, with the guidance of the coming Holy Spirit. What does it mean to us to belong, both to God and to the life of this world?

They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17.16-17)

An illustration to set the scene

Where do you feel you belong? That's the question that those asking about national identity on the census landed upon.

Where do you feel you belong, such as the country or countries you think of as home. It can be different from your citizenship or ethnic group.

And the question also accepts that your national identity can be complex. You can tick all that apply – Scottish and British, British, and English and so on.

These days we see identity as subjective and plural. We give statisticians a headache because we don't fit neatly into one box or another.

The Psalm set for today presents a very binary picture. The righteous, 'those who delight in the law of the Lord' are like this and flourish; those who don't 'the wicked' 'are not so' and will come to a bad end. And in its efforts to establish its identity, particularly after the break from Judaism, the early church sought to draw very sharp distinctions between believers in Christ and others. The demarcation was believing that Jesus was the Son of God, as we heard in our first reading:

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. (1 John 5.10)

There's nothing new about defining our identity in contrast with others. Today the search for a unique personal identity is something of an obsession. In the world of social media in particular, people, like products, need to craft a personal brand. I have a profile, therefore I am.

Today's Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel we are with the disciples as they overhear what was on Jesus' heart for them as he prepared to give himself up to suffering and death. He prays to the Father for them and they, and we, listen in. Jesus prays for the qualities he hopes for in his disciples and the community they will become: that they will be not be split apart, but reflect the unity of Jesus with his Father; that they will experience the fulness of joy that comes from knowing God's love; that they will be protected from bad influences and that they will be set apart as witnesses to God's truth.

His words are full of compassion and fatherly love, almost as if he is already moving back into oneness with God the Father. He is returning home, as it were, and yet the disciples, present and future, will remain in exile until God brings the world to completion. Jesus is acutely aware of the struggles that lie ahead for those who follow him, and he longs for them to stay close to God's truth and not to be scattered like sheep without a shepherd.

The heart of his prayer is the identify that he claims for those whom he has taught. They are people who:

- know God's name through what he has told them, that name of love
- own and declare the name of Jesus because they will understand who he is, the Son of God

- And having received Jesus' teaching they will know who they are, the children of God.

To be a child of God is the identity that trumps all other memberships and affiliations, race, gender, sexuality, social status. It is to be admitted to relationship with God through Christ, nothing less than to share that identity with Jesus himself - *All mine are yours, and yours are mine* (v. 10).

Implications for our own lives

Believing that Jesus is the Son of God is the truth that sets us free. And the disciples at Pentecost and we from our baptism receive the grace to live a different life, the life that is in Christ. Made holy by receiving the word of God and the Spirit we can live as Christ's followers in the world.

But here's the question. As people who identify as Christians what is our relationship with the world? How should we live in the world, while being true to the word of God which is so often very far from what we experience day-to-day? It isn't straightforward to work out how we are meant to be people of peace when freedom is threatened or of justice when our society is divided by inequalities.

And Christian saints and thinkers have given very different answers to this question.

Broadly, some see the world as inherently flawed – 'fallen' – a place where Christians can never be wholly at home. The only way to live is to model a different way of being, a different kind of community, set apart, if you will, from the standards of those who do not identify as Christians. This is the position of Stanley Hauerwas who argues for Christian pacifism on the grounds that, after the Cross, no further violence is admissible by Christians, it has been defeated. Therefore, Christians can only show a different way, that to live without violence is possible and to witness to this by attempting to live out the transformation that Christ's death and resurrection has brought about, however great the challenges.

For others, the whole world is held in God's love and no part of that creation is excluded from his redemption. When we encounter goodness, we encounter God's Spirit at work, whether recognised or not, and as Christians we are to co-operate with others and with activities that contribute to God's bigger plan for the world. Volunteering in a food bank, dedicating one's life to service in one way or another, joining others,

Christian or not, in making the world a better place, these are all helping to build God's Kingdom on earth.

And then there are those prophetic voices whose commitment to Christ calls them to ally with the poor, the excluded and the marginalised and to challenge those powers and structures that bring harm and oppress others, whatever the cost. They would say you cannot be a Christian and stay silent when evil is holding sway.

Perhaps you identify strongly with one of these positions or perhaps you are sympathetic with aspects of more than one. Do you think we are at home in this world and called to join in God's work of redemption? Or are we in exile here, always likely to find ourselves at odds with the values around us and opposed to much of the way power is exercised. Are we people 'on the way' as much as 'of the way', that is one foot on earth and another in heaven?

We won't solve that one this morning! So, let's go back to today's Gospel because Jesus says that it is the Word of God that will keep us faithful.

Jesus doesn't ask God to keep his disciples away from the world.

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.(v.18).

But over and over he emphasises that those who know him belong to God. We can identify as Christian not because we do things a certain way and others don't, but because we know it is God who claims us, Christ who shapes us and the Holy Spirit who shows us the only truth that counts. Jesus prayed to God for his disciples to be able to follow him. He prays for us still because only with God's grace can we love and serve God in the world. The mission is God's not ours. The way we find out who are and how to live is by acknowledging God as our 'influencer'. At our baptism we were given the identity of 'child of God' and it is this identity that will be claimed for us when we leave this life and journey to 'the heavenly city, our home' We are on a journey 'into the hands of the Father who made' us, seeking 'life in Christ who redeemed' us and, 'rejoicing in the Spirit who renews us'. That is who we are.

They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

& and the Rector will preach at St Margaret's:-

As we gather to remember and give thanks for God's gift of eternal life, together we will think about what this means for how we live.

"Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one." John 17:11

An illustration to set the scene

A grandmother, in the last week of her life, said, *"There are so many things I have been stressed about, but all that matters now are my family and closest friends, and our love for each other. Nothing else."*

It is said that as a person approaches the end of life, there are four things they want to say:

"I'm sorry,"

"I forgive you,"

"I love you,"

and "Thank you".

We all have things we regret and, if we have time as death draws near, we want to be relieved of the weight of wrongdoing.

Believers want to know God's forgiveness, even if the person who has been wronged may be unable to forgive.

And we want to forgive others and be relieved of the weight of pain and grudges.

Even more than all this, we want our people to know how much we love them.

The greatest legacy anyone can leave is one of love.

And we want to express our gratitude for the blessings of our life, however much these blessings may have been mixed with hurt and difficulty.

As death approaches, the number of things that are important become fewer, but those few things are extremely important.

Today's Gospel teaching

The words Jesus says in today's Gospel reading are placed in the hours just before his betrayal and death.

We might see them as his final words, as he perhaps realises that all the travelling and preaching, healing and teaching is over for him.

His world, like that of any dying person, becomes smaller, more focused on those close to him, and on his deep desire for their well-being.

The whole of this chapter is a prayer, where we hear Jesus articulate what matters most to him and we witness the intimacy of relationship between God the Father and God the Son – an intimacy Jesus wants his loved ones to share.

He prays for their protection from the evil one.

He is clear that he does not want them to be kept in a bubble of safety – they belong in the world, where there is danger and pain and difficulty, as well as all the joys of human life.

Jesus does not pray for them to be taken out of the world, nor to be kept out of pain – rather, in all the breadth and depth of human experience, its highs and its lows, he wants them to know the constant presence and protection of God.

We might hear a faint echo of Psalm 23 in this – *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil."*

And Jesus prays for the sanctification of his disciples – a reminder that they belong to God, and God's glory is revealed in and through them.

At the heart of the prayer is Jesus' longing for unity.

He prays again and again through the whole chapter that his disciples might be one, with God and with each other.

As we witness this intimate and loving prayer, we see Jesus not just as the petitioner, but also as the proclaimer – he prays, and at the same time he is proclaiming the truth of protection and holiness and belonging.

He is the Word of God, and his words, even in prayer to his Father, are not just truth – they are completely effective.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Jesus' prayer in these last hours of his life is one of love and concern, as well as trust and courage.

Like any parent, he longs for his children to be united. It is this unity and love that matter more than anything else – unity with God and with one another, love for God and one another.

What might this mean for us today, in our churches and in our families?

Would a visitor think that unity and love are at the heart of our life together?

Let us understand that this prayer of Jesus is for us, and not just an ancient text about some long-ago people.

And let us focus, as Jesus did, on the things that really matter.

This may involve us saying:

“I’m sorry,”

“I forgive you,”

“I love you,”

and “Thank you”.

As we do, we will see the more of the truth of the incredible gift of God’s undying love and faithfulness to us.

“Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one.” John 17:11

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk