

Acts 1: 15-17 and 21-26

I John 5: 9-13

John 17: 6-19

A little while ago I had a rather deep and intimate conversation with someone I don't know particularly well.

(& don't worry, I have changed the details to preserve confidentiality)

Things had not turned out the way she had hoped.

She'd received disappointing news.

A no when she'd hoped for a yes.

And if that was not enough, her marriage was a bit shaky.

And as is often the case in such situations, she was being hard on herself.

'I am not always pleasant to live with,' she said.

'Join the club,' I said, or hopefully something less flippant.

And we reflected on the difficulty of getting our private lives right even as everyone tells us 'how well we are doing' in our public life.

Hmm, a familiar story.

And one, I suspect, all of us can relate to in some shape or form.

Things not turning out as we'd hoped.

The persistent challenge of our personal relationships.

Which can leave us feeling a bit bruised and unworthy...

Love and loss.

Hopes dashed.

These are timeless themes, aren't they?

We know this kind of story also from the gospels.

‘...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel’ – to cite a Lukean perspective on the road to Emmaus.

Today’s gospel reading is from John 17.

It comes right at the end of what are known as the farewell discourses, stretching over the previous four chapters, when Jesus says an extended goodbye to his disciples.

John slows the narrative right down at this point.

We are to kind of imagine that we are still sat round the table at the Last Supper where Jesus washed his disciples’ feet.

Bowls of water and towels discarded.

And when we reach the end of chapter 17, we are straight into Jesus’ betrayal and arrest.

His appearance before Pilate and his sentencing to death.

‘...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.’

Love and loss.

Hopes dashed.

The verses we have today – verses 6-19 – are incredibly special.

It is like we are eavesdropping on Jesus’ inner life – the Godhead – as he prays to his Father.

And as he prays for his disciples.

‘Protect them from the evil one,’ Jesus says, anticipating what is to come (verse 15).

And he goes on:

'I am not asking on behalf of the world but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.' (verse 9)

They are yours...

Everything belongs to God.

But there are some strange things going on in this passage.

Things we could easily miss on account of our familiarity with it.

John's gospel, contrary to what scholars once thought, is very clearly presented as an eye witness account.

(Rowan Williams says it is 'the testimony of someone who has had a lifetime of praying, thinking and absorbing the life changing memory of being in the company of Jesus.')

And yet something very unusual is going on in relation to time and space.

Beginning with time, we can see this in the way in which Jesus prays for his disciples.

'Now they [the disciples] know that everything you have given me is from you,' Jesus says.

And a little later...

'...and they [the disciples] have believed that you sent me.'

It is either in the present or the past tense. They know or they have believed.

And yet it is far from clear that any of this is yet the case.

In John's gospel, the disciples are not as bone-headed as they are in Mark's gospel but they still struggle to see.

And what lies ahead – what is just round the corner – is not a proclamation of faith but denial and scattering.

It is far from clear that the disciples do see, do believe – yet.

And there are other examples from within this passage, and just before it, when Jesus says things as if they have happened but they have not yet happened.

Jesus says he has 'protected' his disciples but we don't see any evidence of this until chapter 18.

And he says in chapter 17 verse 4 that his work is finished.

But, it is not finished until he says it is finished two chapters later – on the cross.

That's when we see his glory.

So, it is as if Jesus' prayer in John 17 is offering us a window onto what will be.

There will come a time when the disciples see clearly, know who Jesus is, and recommit themselves to him.

'My Lord and my God'. Thomas says in the locked house.

'Lord, you know that I love you.' Peter, three times, following Jesus' resurrection appearance on the beach.

Now the disciples do know that Jesus is the Son of God, that he has been sent by God.

And similarly, if normal understandings of time are subverted, so too it is with space in today's gospel reading.

Is Jesus in the world or is he not?

'I am no longer in the world', he says,

And: '...I am coming to you' (present tense, he is on his way)

But then:

'I speak these things in the world'.

It would appear it is both.

Which would seem to tell us something pretty important about the nature of the Christ.

Jesus is in the world.

He is flesh and blood.

He is in time and space.

It is an eye-witness account.

All this matters – a lot – notably for our salvation.

But it is not all.

Jesus comes from the Father.

Because Jesus is so open to God we can say he ‘comes from the Father’.

He transcends all these earthly things.

Time and space.

Flesh and blood.

He transcends them.

So, the question is: what does this passage say to us?

Why is John writing like this?

Surely, we can say, Jesus’ prayer, on which we eavesdrop, is not just for the twelve.

It is for us. It must be for us too.

It is a great commission for us as we look out into the world.

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world’
(verse 6)

Have we?

Do we make Jesus' name known in the world?

And:

'While I was with them, I protected them in your name...I guarded them.'

That's also for us.

Is that how we see our relationship with our neighbour?

Guarding them in the name of Christ.

Standing where Jesus stands.

That's our calling – though we might well ask how that can possibly be?

And in that world of love and loss...?

Of dashed hopes.

Of regret and remorse.

Those timeless things I spoke about earlier.

This passage – Jesus' prayer, our prayer – is surely nourishing.

It offers food for the journey.

Just as Jesus prayed and saw the future for his disciples.

'My Lord and my God, you know that I love you.'

So, we can see our future.

Not every detail for sure.

But what we need to know.

Our ultimate end.

'I am coming to you...'

‘...I speak these things in the world...’

‘...so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.’

My Lord and my God, you know that I love you. Amen.