Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St John 4

Sunday 19th June – Saturday 2nd July

Introduction

Scholars think that the work we know as St John's Gospel has its origins in the 70s AD but reached its final form at some point between the years 90 and 110. It differs from the other Gospel in the way it presents Jesus - through a series of seven "signs" starting with the Wedding at Cana and ending with the raising of Lazarus and a series of seven "I Am" speeches which reflect growing tension between the embryonic Church and the Synagogue. Christianity soon separated itself from Judaism and St John is a record of the start of this separation. Tragically, the way the writer portrays Jewish people were used by later commentators to justify murderous anti-semitism and it is hard to hear phrases like "the Jews" in this Gospel without a shudder.

Like the other Gospels it is anonymous but it does identify "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as a source. Its similarities in style with the three Johannine Epistles lead modern scholars to treat them as coming, if not from the same author, but from a community of authors. Of course, like many debates on Biblical authorship all this is speculation.

We're not as familiar with St John as it is not read through the year like the other Gospels are. Instead, large chunks are inserted into the Church year so we know some passages very well indeed and others not at all well. Over the next few months we will read our way through this Gospel allowing ourselves to read the entire book not just selected passages chosen by the Church for Sunday after Sunday.

Will and Testament, because it represents Jesus' provision for the disciples' needs on the eve of his death.

We could look at the passage as being full of despair. Why? Because the disciples have proven disappointing, even though Jesus has tried to prepare them for his coming death and resurrection, they have failed to understand. They expect a Messiah of worldly power, like King David, and have not been able to grasp the very different character of Jesus' ministry. The disciples are nondescript and few in numbers and No CEO today would entrust a significant project to such an undistinguished group, but Jesus is leaving the future of God's work in their hands—and in God's hands. That is the key—in God's hands. Jesus is leaving the disciples, but he is not leaving them alone. The Holy Spirit will accompany them—will strengthen them—guide them. The union of the disciples with Father, Son, and Spirit makes the impossible possible. This tiny band of ordinary people will turn the world upside down.

It is the cry-of-the-heart of perfect love, and it is the prayer of perfect faith. Jesus knows these disciples' weaknesses, but he also knows that God will take care of them, just as he knows our weaknesses and knows that God will take care of us.

Prayer

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love
and do what thou wouldst do.
Breathe on me, breath of God,
Till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.
Breathe on me, breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with thee the perfect of thine eternity. Amen

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Sunday 19th June Psalm 96

Carole Elphick Retired minister worshipping at Muswell Hill URC.

Sing, sing, sing to the Lord,
sing, every land,
your own new song;
sing of your Saviour each day!
Let all the nations hear of his glory,
victories, wonders,
tell them the story
praising the Lord
with heart and tongue,
praising the Lord
with heart and tongue.

2 Great, great, great is the Lord,
great and most worthy of our love,
great above all other gods:
they are but nothings,
God is all-glorious,
splendid, majestic,
strong and victorious,
maker of earth and heaven above,
maker of earth and heaven above.

3 Bring, bring, bring to the Lord,
bring to his name the worship due,
bring your best gift to his throne:
God is all-holy, tremble before him,
clothed in his beauty,
come to adore him
tell what the Lord has done for you,
tell what the Lord has done for you.

4 Joy, joy, joy in the heavens,
joy for the life of sea and earth,
joy in the field and the wood!
Welcome his kingdom,
praise his salvation;
now he is coming, Lord of creation,
judging the peoples with his truth,
judging the peoples with his truth.

Christopher Idle from Psalm 96
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Reflection

On a recent stay in hospital, owing to strict lockdown protocols, I was left to my own devices in a single room with no visitors. Contact with staff only happened when they had donned full PPE at the door. Their skill and care was beyond praise and the outcome was good but there were no chaplaincy services available as contacts needed to be minimised.

Prayer

Gracious God,
when our time to speak out comes,
may it be known to us.
Hold us in your love as you held your Son,
so that in speaking truth to power
we may speak fearlessly
and bear witness to your truth and love. Amen.

Saturday 2 July 2022 St John 17: 20 - 26

Sue Knight - Local Church Leader, Reigate Park URC. Lay Preaching Commissioner, Southern Synod

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

Reflection

This prayer was prayed by Jesus just before his death, and could be called his High Priestly Prayer, because he intercedes with God on behalf of the disciples, both present and future. Maybe we ought to think of this prayer, rather than the "Our Father," as the Lord's Prayer, because it's the prayer in which Jesus pours out his heart. The prayer is also known as Jesus' Last

world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 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. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Reflection

Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his impending death. In John's gospel his words have been of challenge and comfort 'I am telling you the truth: you will cry and weep, but the world will be glad; you will be sad, but your sadness will turn to gladness'.

Jesus now turns in prayer to God his Father, gathering his friends' fears and forebodings into a place of comfort. Awful as the events to come are (Jesus has already predicted that in his hour of greatest trial his friends will desert him), they are to remember that within them God and his Son are at work. The glory of the bond of love between them will be revealed, and the gift of eternal life will come to those who can receive it. This bond of love extends to all Jesus' friends.

Jesus' disciples will remain in the world which is to deal so violently with him, so he prays for their protection; not a removal from this world, but to be guarded from the temptation of its evil. So they are 'in this world', but not 'of this world', for they belong to him.. Their mission will be to speak truth to power, as Jesus himself did.

The late John Eaton says 'Such a mission is only possible in consequence of the mission of Jesus… In this concluding act of prayer, he consecrates himself, making over his body, his life, to be a sacrifice for the world's salvation. Truth, like a power released from the cross, will take and hold them in God, the truth which is the divine faithfulness, the word of God, the grace given through the Son'.

The word had gotten around the unit that I was a minister and I had several very interesting conversations with cleaning staff, consultants, radiologists, food delivery people and nurses about faith and life. One evening a very young nurse came in behind layers of plastic and shielding and whilst sorting out drip bags and bed sheets he asked if he could pray for me.

I said yes please and waited to see what might happen next. I was both humbled and astonished as he knelt on the floor of my room, spread out his arms and praised God for several minutes. He spoke of God's love and care and power and glory. Not once did he refer to me or to himself or to any other of the very needy patients in the hospital.

His sole focus was on glorifying God as creator, redeemer and sustainer of the life we are given.

That is what this Psalm does-praising the Lord with heart and tongue for God is all glorious, all holy and the ultimate bringer of joy. We have all had incredibly difficult journeys over the last two years especially and the onset of new wars, new catastrophes and new horrors seems destined to bring us and the world down still further. But the undiluted praise and adoration that the young nurse poured out before God, at a time it wasn't clear how things would turn out, set his faith, my faith, our faith and the faith of the world in the context of a completely overwhelming glory of love.

A lesson I shall never forget. Thanks be to God

Prayer

Thank you, living God, for daily reminders of your goodness and care where ever they may come from. By putting you at the very centre of our lives we can receive healing, forgiveness and strength beyond our imagining. Hallelujah.

Monday 20th June St John 13: 21 - 30

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, in transitional ministry with Lee Green, Catford and Bellingham URCs

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Reflection

How does it feel to be betrayed? When someone close misuses what they know about you? And what happens when it's not yet known about, but carried on in secret, under the radar, so that others around you have no idea what's going on?

Jesus and Judas lock eyes. The beloved disciple has a fragment of the story. The rest of the bewildered disciples have no idea what is happening, misinterpreting symbolic actions and public communications.

Through the dinner courtesy of sharing tasty morsels, Jesus offers Judas a chance to change his mind without unmasking him publicly. But for Judas to refuse the offering will draw attention to himself, and at that moment Satan, God's Adversary appears for the only time in John's Gospel.

we give thanks that you are with us
we give thanks for the life of Jesus, who shows us who you are
we give thanks for a way to follow and a kingdom to live.
The creativity of words can stretch to reach you,
but today, we give thanks for the plain truth of you. Amen

Friday 1 July 2022 St John 17: 1 - 19

The Rev'd John Young, retired minister of National Synod of Scotland, member Giffnock URC

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, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'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. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 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. 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. 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. 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. I have given them your word, and the

Reflection

I love a good figure of speech as much as the next person. I appreciate the creativity of language that can inspire the human mind and embellish the soul in imaginative ways. I also really enjoy a good mixed metaphor: “Sir, I smell a rat; I see him forming in the air and darkening the sky; but I’ll nip him in the bud.” (att: Sir Boyle Roche, 1736-1807)

That said, there are times when it’s flippin’ annoying! Just tell me what you want to say!

Who are you Jesus?

This passage in John sounds very similar to a coming-out story to me. It is the right time for Jesus to tell his story; he is comfortable to express who he is ‘…because you have loved me and have believed I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world…’.

There it is. The incarnation is laid plainly before us. Phew – now we know! What happens next? Do we change as a result of Jesus’ life-changing revelation?

I suspect we go back to life, we get on with whatever our day has in store (name that for yourself…), but I hope our trust in Jesus has deepened. His birth, ministry, death and resurrection, show us who God is for us: love – unconditional, boundless love, that surrounds the world.

Take courage my friends! You don’t need to navigate any tricky parables or figures of speech today. With the disciples, my relief is palpable – Jesus has spoken plainly and I can let his words dwell with me: ‘I came from the Father and have come into the world…’. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Incarnate God,

The early readers of this Gospel knew about betrayal, through splits from their religious origins and attacks from the authorities. Every resistance movement has its informers, and theirs was no different. They were assured by the words of Jesus that such acts by intimates within the beloved community did not undermine the truth of his message.

How does it feel to be the betrayer? To twist the knife in the ones we love? Why do we not pause before we act? Why do we not HALT when we’re Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired and on the edge of doing something we’ll regret? Judas was at a meal but maybe he was hungry for reassurance and answers as events moved to their climax. Was he angry with Jesus for not meeting his expectations as a leader? Did he feel that everyone had special friends in the close-knit group while he was left out and lonely? Or was he just exhausted after travelling the road to Jerusalem and couldn’t see how it could end well?

And it was night.

Prayer

God, remind me to HALT
to be aware of my needs
to accept my vulnerabilities
to take healthy action to care for myself
so that I may not betray the people closest to me.*
God, remind me that I am SALT
Secure, Affirmed, Loved, Trusted
Safe, Aligned, Loveable, Trained
Serving, Affirming, Learning, Tending
And God
when someone offers me a way back from the night
give me the courage to accept it. Amen

Tuesday 21st June. St John 13: 31 - 35

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Minister, Thornbury URC and Trinity-Henleaze URC (Bristol)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Reflection

John's Gospel delights in drawing contrasts. Judas has left to betray Jesus just before today's text. He goes out into the darkness of night; departing the room with its lamps lit and the warmth of friendship and trust. We are, seemingly, watching the beginning of the tragedy of Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet we are not watching a tragedy unfold. Quite the opposite. We are watching a beginning rather than an end; a possibility being born rather than a dream dying. The events of Holy Week that culminate in the Cross are an enthronement, an inauguration. This is what it is for Christ to be glorified. What has been hidden is becoming plain. Upon the Cross and from the empty tomb all that Jesus has claimed will be vindicated. Incredibly, this is how God is most fully revealed to us, in the utter desolation and the letting go of power that Christ reveals. This is how much we mean to God, how deep the Father's love for us, how wondrous the Cross that we survey.

But none of this stops with Jesus. It becomes contagious, this inexhaustible love of God. We know plenty about the world cowed by contagion these past years. Jesus, here, highlights something altogether more glorious and wonderful: love. It is his love for all creation that now turns him towards

will "turn into" joy. The sorrow of a woman in labour is not eventually replaced by some unrelated joy. No, her sorrow, her pain, is purposeful! The miracle of a baby, of new life puts everything into perspective.

In the same way, Jesus wants to encourage these men to hold on; not to give up hope when the darkness of His death covers them. They WILL see Jesus again, and His reappearance will mean rejoicing like they've never rejoiced before.

Prayer

You work in such wonderful ways, Lord. I trust that You will take that which brings sorrow in my life and make it a source of joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thursday 30th June St John 16: 25 - 33

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.'

His disciples said, 'Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.' Jesus answered them, 'Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!'

rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

Reflection

Leonardo DaVinci painted "The Last Supper" according to his imagination, but John paints this scene as an eyewitness. Since chapter 13, Jesus has been teaching these men in light of His coming arrest, torture, and death. He's been trying to prepare them for what is to come and strengthen them in light of the radically new work God is doing.

But as we see, the disciples are confused, both by the cryptic language and his mention of "going to the Father". We need to remember that these men had no idea that this would be their last night with Jesus. They still expected Jesus to lead a military revolution against the Romans.

It would only be a matter of hours before Jesus would be taken from them, and only a matter of days before they saw Him again, risen from the dead.

Jesus knows exactly what these disciples are discussing. He knows they're confused about all this in "a little while" language. Jesus does not fill in the blanks in terms of details about his imminent departure and reappearance. He focuses not on what will happen, but on how they will respond to what happens.

His absence will give them sorrow. But this is not the kind of sorrow you have when the dog chews up your favourite slippers. No! This sorrow produces weeping and lamenting. The absence of Jesus will even be a source of rejoicing for "the world", for those opposed to the truth of God that Jesus has been revealing.

But Jesus also gives them good news: their sorrow will quickly turn into joy. He does not say that their sorrow will be replaced by joy. Their sorrow

the Cross. His time with his friends in the way they have known it draws to an end. But something is passing on. This is the power of the love of God known and shared. It changes the world around us as it changes us from the inside.

Judas goes out into the night and shuts the door behind himself. But Jesus sees it differently. He sees an end, and knows what it will begin. We become the continuation of the revelation of the love of God in Jesus Christ through the quality of our love for God and for the world. That can be our today.

Prayer

Your commandment is no small demand, Lord.
You invite us to love;
love met in you being shared freely.
Is it not too much to ask of us?
Are we not too few, too frail, too fickle to be entrusted with this?
Don't you know us?
You do know us!
That's why you speak these words, invite us in, call us onwards.
You believe in us even more than we believe in you. Amen.

Wednesday 22nd June St John 13: 36-38

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington United Reformed Church

Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

Reflection

Peter is baffled. Jesus is talking about going – but it is night, it's dark, scarcely a good time for anyone to go out; although admittedly Judas has just done so. And where is Jesus going to? He doesn't give Peter a direct answer, but about one thing he is adamant. Peter and the others cannot follow as yet. Later, perhaps. In his final teaching discourse Jesus will address Peter's question. He is going to the Father but by way of death. For the moment, Peter can't understand what Jesus is saying about departure and who would blame him? He has some idea though that there might be a risk of death and he asserts confidently that he is ready to lay down his life for his Lord. Now that's not an idle boast. A few hours later, he will draw his sword and begins to fight. Jesus cannot deny Peter's readiness for death.

But Jesus knows that another sort of trial is coming up – for when the cause seems lost, then Peter will fail and fail badly; he will deny ever having known Jesus. Indeed before cock crow he will have denied Jesus three times.

This exchange between Peter and Jesus teaches us a lesson. We may think that we are loyal followers of Jesus, but when we are unexpectedly put to the test, don't we try to cope in our own strength? But self-sufficiency is not enough. When we fall short, we make the painful discovery that our trust in God is not total, that our faith is skin deep, that it has not become a habit. Like Peter, we have a bitter sense of failure. But our failure drives us back to God and we discover again the greatness of God's love and grace.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God,
grant that through constant fellowship with you,
we may come to know your grace:
the grace of courage, in suffering or danger;

care. Our biggest enemy is not anti-religion it's apathy. People who have no belief in God and can see no reason why they should believe. How can we show them the way to a full life with God? How can we live out the promises of God; the example of Jesus; through the power of the Holy Spirit? Whatever we decide to do, the work must continue, even though the dangers will still be there. With the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and support us, the courage to continue with a battle against indifference will be more than worth it.

Prayer

Lord we live in a world that just can't be bothered to believe. People believe in doing good, in caring for others, and offering comfort but do not believe in you. Help us to show them the fulfilment you bring; the promises you keep and the everlasting life you offer that they may deepen their faith in humanity by trusting in you. Help us bring your word to life and our faith to action. Amen

Wednesday 29th June St John 16: 16 - 24

Ann Barton, Lay Leader at Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.' Then some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying to us, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"; and "Because I am going to the Father"?' They said, 'What does he mean by this "a little while"? We do not know what he is talking about.' Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, 'Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will

'I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Reflection

In the hymn "Go forth and tell" the hymn writer says "how can they call if they have never heard, the gracious invitation of his word". Jesus is telling the disciples that he will no longer be with them, so it is up to them to continue his work. They will face challenges, even from people who believe, as they will think they are serving God by destroying them. The Advocate (Holy Spirit) is coming to support them and to show them the way – to continue to share with them the work of God and show the world where they are going wrong.

The disciples will face a difficult task – to continue to bring the Kingdom to a people who did not believe in Jesus and so had him crucified. To continue in Jesus' work will bring rejection, danger and more than likely death. But the disciples must be strong and go on with their task.

We live in a world that on the whole either does not believe or does not

the grace of boldness in standing up for what is right;
the grace of preparedness, that we may not fall into temptation;
the grace of steadfastness in following Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Thursday 23rd June St John 14: 1-13

Lawrence Heath-Moore is a Mission & Discipleship Mentor for the NW Synod and a member of Worsley Road United Reformed Church.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Reflection

“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no one comes to the Father except through me!”

Isn’t it extraordinary how we’ve managed to distort what Jesus is saying here? Jesus says - as unambiguously as possible - “I am the Way …”, and we have distorted and weaponised his words to read, “Christianity is the Way”!

I say, “distorted”, because Jesus never intended to start a new religion (Christianity). He came to renew the Judaism of his day by “showing them the Father” (in John’s terms).

Today’s passage is part of the section about Jesus’ impending departure that begins in 13:1. It is John’s equivalent of Jesus preparing to walk the Way of the Cross. When Thomas plaintively responds, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going! How can we know the way?”, Jesus responds, “I am the Way …!” Easter will reveal this shocking, astonishing Truth: the only road to the Life that God has for creation is the Way of the Cross that Jesus is about to walk - the road that leads through death to resurrection as Children of God (1:12-13).

This is the opposite of the “join us or you’re damned!” imperial Christianity! Jesus had told Nicodemus that the only hope for creation is to start over - to be born again (3:3). Nicodemus’ reaction was as comic as it is wrong-headed: “How can we re-enter the womb?” The Easter Jesus gives us the answer to his question. “You can’t! You do it by dying and rising. I am giving my life for that to happen!”

Truths about God can be found in all sorts of faiths, places and people. But only Jesus has died and been raised by God on behalf of all creation. God has done that through no-one else.

our loyalty lies?

If, like the rich young ruler who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, we reply that we follow the Commandments we, like him, can feel right and justified that we obey the Law.

This response wasn't wrong, but Jesus challenged him that it wasn't enough. Just following the letter of the law *makes us good citizens, but following Jesus makes us good disciples.

Living out our lives in a way that brings justice alive for all and challenges the law to breath equality is more challenging.

There are times when laws are made that don't uphold life in the way Jesus teaches us to live it, what do we do then?

Ultimately we have to decide - who do we want to belong to, Christ or this world? Would we stand up to testify this even if the world hated us for it?

Prayer

Loving God, help us to love others
Those easy to love, those hard to love
Not forgetting to love ourselves and to love you
Amen

Tuesday 28th June St John 16: 1-15

The Rev’d Ruth Watson SCM MediaCityUK Church, Salford Quays

‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. 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. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

Monday 27th June St John 15: 18 - 26

Sam Goodman, Elder, Derby Central URC

'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. 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. 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. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause. When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning."

Reflection

Wanting, or maybe needing to be loved is very human. If we are loved we belong. If we feel unloved or hated it affects how we feel about ourselves and how we belong. It's all very well Jesus telling us we don't belong to the world, but we live in it and what it thinks of us matters to us.

But if we only go out to conform, to act in ways that make us popular, successful and well judged by the world's standards, then we aren't living up to what Christ asks of us: to do what is right in spite of what it might do to our reputations.

It is unlikely that we will be called upon to be martyrs, to give up our lives, but we might be called upon to give up some of our comfort, our habits, maybe some of our security. Maybe we are being challenged to ask where

Prayer

Your Way - THE Way - is hard, Lord.
Don't give me a bowl and towel –
I'd rather have people at my feet than be at theirs.
And as for my fellow-travellers –
I really struggle to love them at all, most of the time -
let alone love them like you do!
Thank you for loving me the way you do.
Thank you for welcoming me back every time I fail or deny you.
By your Spirit, help me to plant my footsteps in yours
so that we can walk the Way together. Amen.

Friday 24th June St John 14: 15 - 31

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker, Coventry

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

Reflection

Today’s reading begins with “if you love me you will keep my commandments”, this is important because if we keep Jesus’ commandments we are (hopefully) doing it from a place of love and relationship. The disciples have no idea what is going to unfold over the coming days and weeks. We may know, yet we also are reassured that Jesus is ever-living so we can have a relationship with him and we too are gifted with the Holy Spirit who gifts and inspires us as we grow in faith and journey the road of discipleship.

Over the last couple of years I have seen a lot of YouTube videos where folk are getting involved in “disaster prepping” with 72/96 hour emergency bags, long term pantries and emergency kits for their cars/minivans in case they have to flee their homes. The reason I have seen more of this is not because I have become a fan of prepper videos, but because the global pandemic has had such an effect on “regular” people. Most of these videos are from Christian mums who are about my age in normal places in America. The reason they have got involved in this sort of behaviour is because they didn’t feel at all prepared when the pandemic hit the western world in early 2020 and want to ensure that if anything else were to happen they would be better prepared.

and known among us. Such an advent is bound to shake things up – yet for “Zion”, the place and people of God's presence, this is no fearful prospect but rather an occasion for great gladness. For as God's truth blazes a trail, the emptiness of every competing claim on human loyalty shall be exposed.

Yet for the time being, the reality and reach of evil must be acknowledged. From the glorious expectancy of the first two stanzas, in the third we're jolted back to our present and pervasive experience of pain. Faith doesn't exempt us from suffering; but what we do have is the comfort and conviction, in faith, that injustice and captivity shall not have the final word.

For indeed – as we find in the final stanza – blessedness is not just our fate, but our inheritance. By God's boundless grace, God's servants gain the status of God's children. So we're encouraged finally to amplify the proclamation with which the psalm began: an ocean can only roar its praise, but our joyful privilege is to worship God by name!

Throughout the psalm, three strands have been woven: the revelation of God, the response of humanity/wider creation, and the effect or consequence of God's rule (this is even more evident in the Biblical text, which falls naturally into three rather than four stanzas). So let's ponder: Where have we seen God's glory revealed? Have our lifestyles welcomed or resisted this revelation? And what might it mean to live as God's children today?

Prayer

Lord of all:
open our eyes as you come to “show the way”,
open our ears as you turn our lamenting to “songs of peace”,
open our hearts to “declare the Lord's most holy name”.
Sovereign God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:
glory be to you. Amen.

Sunday 26th June Psalm 97

The Rev'd Dominic Grant, Minister, Barnet URC and St Andrew's Chesterfield Road URC

God reigns! Earth rejoices!
Oceans shout God's might!
Clad in truth and joy,
God's throne is our delight.
Clouds roll aside, and
night becomes as day.
God will dwell among us;
God will show the way!

2: Fires will blaze the pathway;
stars will mark the place,
when God comes in glory,
meets us face to face.
Mountains will shake and
worthless idols fall;
Zion will rejoice, for
God is Lord of all!

3: Evil walks beside us,
crushes with its grief;
yet in God the faithful
find their sure relief.
Shackles will break and
chains of bondage cease;
former lamentations
now are songs of peace.

4: Light dawns for the righteous,
joy for God's own heirs--
love all loves excelling,
grace beyond compare.
Daughters and sons,
God's majesty proclaim!
Let your hearts declare the
Lord's most holy name!

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You can hear the tune suggested for this, Noel Nouvelet, here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152458

Reflection

This majestic Psalm is a hymn to God who comes in glory and supremacy. In the first stanza we witness Creation's testimony. The roaring of the ocean serves to proclaim God's rule; and it's as if the very purpose of the clouds is to part dramatically at God's arrival, dispelling all darkness. That's quite an entrance!

The second stanza reiterates this assurance that God intends to be seen

Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples, because of the relationship he had with them, so he is trying to ensure they can understand as much as possible, because he loves them and they him. This is the same with us, Jesus loves us and therefore tries to prepare us as much as possible for the next steps on our journey with him. We have to be prepared to listen to him and love the world.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the relationship we have with you and for the Holy Spirit who advises and guides our steps of faith. Remind us that there are many things in life that we will not feel prepared for, but that we can always rely on you in those times. Provoke us to share that love and relationship with others so that they too can experience the joy, comfort and support throughout life. Amen.

Saturday 25th June St John 15: 1-17

Sam Richards, service as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe Community

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes[a] to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,

and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Reflection

Friendship is good for us – those who have wider and more diverse relationships are healthier, live longer and suffer with less anxiety and depression than those with fewer diverse networks. Friendships are a central axis of meaning, hope, and purpose for life. Friends provide all kinds of help and support, provide stimulation through shared experiences and conversation, offer love and esteem, and it is with our closest friends that we work out our morals, the right thing to do.

Whilst new communication technology ever expands our acquaintances and ability to have single-issue or single-interest friendships, research indicates a marked decline in close friends and confidants, and a rise in loneliness in all age groups. Friendship is an embodied person-to-person relationship. The practical outworking of actual friendships means the existence of the kind of person who is a friend – someone capable of love, patience, kindness, loyalty, tolerance, trust, concern for the other and so on – showing the fruit of the Spirit or embodying Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians.

Friendship is a deep commitment, involving vulnerability of both self-revelation and self-giving.

The incarnation is God's supreme act of friendship. Jesus says 'you are my friends' to his disciples – a radical reframing of their relationship. Jesus is forming his disciples into a community of friends, with a mission of offering friendship, self-sacrificing love, to others.

As followers of Jesus we are invited into this friendship, shown that by abiding within it we will grow the fruitful dispositions that enable us to invite others into this community of friendship. We are obedient to Christ in our embodied relational lives – when we love one another as Christ has loved us. As Paul succinctly puts it:
'We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you' (2 Corinthians 5:20 The Message).

Prayer

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
And what a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer…
Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer

(Joseph Medlicott Scriven)