



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Seventh Sunday of Easter Year C 2022

Acts 16.16-34

John 17.20-26

This passage from St. John's gospel is part of the great prayer which follows Jesus', 'farewell discourse' to his disciples. It is best to read the whole chapter, to read the whole wonderful prayer and of course to gain a fuller understanding of what Jesus is saying. To take anything out of its context is usually difficult but in the case of St. John, whose gospel is packed with theology so much can be missed.

Chapter 20 begins 'After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said...' Just what were the words that he had spoken to the disciples before this great prayer to his Father?

³²'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. ³³I 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!'

It is a prophecy of what is to come. Judas has gone out into the darkness to complete his work of betrayal. Peter will dismally fail his Lord in the courtyard, the others will run away. Jesus will be left alone to face his 'trial' and execution. Human fragility will have overcome even these, his dearest companions. **BUT** Jesus says, 'I am not alone because the Father is with me,' with God he can never be alone and actually his words apply to the disciples and to every Christian. The disciples will face persecution, but they must take heart, must never give in. Jesus is always with them and he has 'conquered the world.' It is vitally important to understand what Jesus means by 'the world' here as so often in St. John's gospel. Think back to John chapter 1

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

The beginning of John's gospel illuminates what Jesus is saying here very clearly. 'The world' is used in the sense of its brokenness, of those who have turned their back on God to follow their own

ways. It means the evil in the world and those who precise it, as in the old expression, 'the world, the flesh and the devil.' There is a very good example of this in our reading from Acts where the worldly powers persecute the followers of Jesus who are taking his gospel to Philippi. It is those wicked powers which will drag Jesus to Calvary and will kill him, thinking they are victorious. But the powers of darkness can never overcome goodness, Jesus knows he will fight a cruel battle with the powers of the world on the cross but he will conquer evil forever through love and he will defeat death at his resurrection on the third day.

This is the beginning of his great prayer, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.'

It is time, Jesus has accomplished all that was required, now comes the final trial and triumph. Now he will be, 'obedient to death, even death on a cross,' but then the Father will exalt him on high. Jesus will be with God as he was in the beginning.

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.'

Jesus then begins his great prayer for protection for the disciples. He has warned them that anyone who wishes to be his follower must 'take up his cross' this is to come true literally for so many of those disciples and Christians down the ages. They are in the world but the powers of the world will hate them and persecute them. Therefore, knowing this, Jesus prays for protection for them.

⁹ '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. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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.'

This is a wonderful prayer, not only in that Jesus asks for protection for them, for us but because it expresses the wonderful relationship we have with God. Jesus has already said in chapter 14 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me,' and he continues with the wonderful promise 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ 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.'

So here we have it, one of the clearest illustrations of the Godhead, of the trinity of persons in a communion of love. God will send the Holy Spirit to protect them, strengthen, sustain and yes infuse them with understanding.

Soon Jesus will no longer be with them; soon they will feel the desperate sorrow of loneliness and grief. Soon they will be at a loss and quite unable, in their own strength, to accomplish anything let alone the great task Jesus has given them. However the crux of this prayer for them is to show them that they are not alone, that they are not acting in their own strength, in their own power. If they were, of course, they could achieve little. No, they will have the 'Advocate' the Holy Spirit with them; then and then only can they achieve wonders for God and in Jesus' name!

It is Jesus who is the advocate here, who is praying to his Father on their behalf. But as our reading for today begins we have a truly wonderful line.

²⁰ 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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.'

Wow! Is the response to that, I think! Jesus is praying for his disciples, but he is praying for all those who follow him down the ages and that means us. Here in this great prayer, before the events which are to come, Jesus speaks to God, in love on our behalf.

I was asked once to try to represent my idea of God. Not God, but a representation of my idea of God. It was only an illustration but I based it of course on the central Christian faith in the trinity but focusing specifically on what Jesus says in these chapters. I drew three concentric circles, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one within the other with arrows interpenetrating each one because the Spirit and Son are in the Father, the Father and Spirit are in the Son and of course the Son and Father are in the Spirit, God in three persons in a perfect community of love. In the centre of the drawing, I put a tiny dot which for me represented all that is and will be, a bit like Mother Julian's hazelnut. Of course it represented me and all humanity, everything, everyone held at the centre of God's love.

There are those who choose evil, who turn away from God, those who destroy – 'the world' as it is used here. But we have Jesus' prayer and his assurance that God surrounds us with his love. That God the Holy Spirit is with us, within us, strengthening and sustaining us throughout our lives!

The next part of the great prayer is fundamental to true Christianity. Jesus has given his great commandment. You are to love one another as I have loved you. That is not at all the same, as 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' We will see the extent of Jesus' love in the events that are to happen so soon after his prayer. And he continues, 'By this shall all know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.' We are reminded of that comment on members of the early Church, 'See how these Christians love one another.' What Jesus is saying here is very similar.

'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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I 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.'

Jesus gives the assurance that we have a real relationship with God, that we are included in that great overarching relationship of love. Well then what Jesus requires is that we pass on that teaching, that good news. Take his message out into the world so that people may learn of the wonders of God and come to him. But his followers must reflect that wonderful community of love within the Godhead. That is, live in love and unity with one another reflecting the teaching of Jesus Christ. That is Jesus' commandment; that is his great prayer. How sadly has he been failed throughout the ages and still today. How sadly has 'division marred his image in us?' The world has crept in, the world with its desire for power, its selfishness and greed has made human beings more interested in getting their own way than in true love, true unity.

We have to go back to the words of Jesus. As the bishop said in the novel, 'The Choir,' 'You can only win anyone lastingly to anything by love!' How true. There is a famous saying, 'The cross is like an I crossed out.' Indeed it is. Jesus has, by washing his disciple's feet, given the example of service that is at the heart of true love. We must show compassion, show care, understand that all are children of God. To quote that bishop once again, 'I think you mean the elite, the pick of people. Well there is, in God's eyes no such thing!' We are all loved, all equal before God and no one has the right to

impose their will on another person. Unity between peoples, unity within the church, and unity within community is what Jesus wants. Unity is only achieved through caring and being selfless. There is no room for power games in true love.

²⁴ '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.'

That takes us to the words at the beginning of the gospel once again. Ultimately, in God's time, creation will be renewed and Jesus will rule, the kingdom values will replace worldly ones. We say, 'we look for the coming of his kingdom.' We need to work for it too by living our lives in love. Jesus promises a share in that wonderful relationship with God. He will indeed be our 'Abba,' close as our own breathing if we turn to him in love.

There follows what is the most wonderful description of the relationship of love we have been invited to share with God.

²⁵ 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I 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.'

That last sentence is truly wonderful. We are part of that loving relationship within the trinity! It may be that so many in the 'world' choose to go their own way. But Jesus has given his gospel to the disciples; it is for them to take it into the world, for all Christians to do the same in an unbroken line from Jesus. It is to us; to all his followers that he gives the promise of salvation and new life with him. He tells his disciples that they are holy, set apart from the world and its ways. Set apart because they try to do the will of God and live according to Jesus' teaching. In that way we are all, set apart, members of the holy priesthood of all believers. There is no status within the love of God. So the love of Jesus is with us always. It is up to every one of us to try to live out that love and tell others of the love he has for them. Each generation of Christians has the commission of Jesus; each one of us carries the baton for him and his commission to hand it on to others.

The reading from Acts illustrates Jesus' teaching in the great prayer perfectly. Here they stand, Paul and his followers in the alien and pagan city of Philippi. Here these Christians are soon to meet the onslaught of 'the world;' the powers of darkness will oppose those of goodness in the form of Jesus' missionaries.

What a contrast it is, a few paragraphs ago we are told that they gather at the 'place of prayer' by the river. Here they begin to tell the people of Jesus Christ. They meet Lydia, a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth, a woman who can make her own decisions. She is a woman of means; she has a 'household'. After hearing the word of God she is so moved she asks for baptism, together with her household. Then she does something active for God, she offers Paul and the other men a place to stay. This will be their base, a place of comparative safety, an H.Q. as it were. She has turned to Jesus Christ; the power of God has come upon her and acted through her. What a contrast to the girl we meet in the reading for today.

¹⁶ 'One day' as we were going to the place of prayer; we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.'

This poor girl is possessed twice over, firstly by this strange and dark 'spirit' opposed to the Holy Spirit of God, and secondly by these man who are abusing her by using her as their slave to make

money out of her. What an awful life she must have led. Interestingly this so-called 'spirit of divination' recognises exactly who Paul and his friends are and knows full well what their mission is.¹⁷ 'While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.'

I am quite sure she was being a nuisance and derogatory, nevertheless that is exactly who they are and exactly what they proclaim, salvation through the love and power of Jesus Christ. Paul, thoroughly irritated, takes action.

¹⁸ 'She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.' Once again the powers of darkness are vanquished by God. This supernatural power has been cast out and the girl is at last free of it. Her 'owners' are furious of course because she was their source of income.

'They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities.²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' Now we see 'the world' that Jesus was referring to. Paul and Silas will soon experience the persecution Jesus has told his disciples of. We see the mob in action too and we are reminded of Jesus' treatment by the Jews and Romans. Their punishment is severe and degrading and they are thrown in prison for disturbing the peace. They are in the inner cell secure in the stocks. This is the power of man, what the authorities had not reckoned with was the power of God. This is a pagan city, and these Jews are punished according to the abusive power of humans. Paul and Silas were singled out as the instigators. We know that Luke and Timothy were also there, but Paul and Silas bore the brunt of the punishment. The charge of religious activity against Rome was a cover for the persecution of minorities, which is as ancient as humanity.

We know all about the evils of the mob, we have only to look back to the crowd before Pilate. So, beaten and shackled, unfairly abused and tormented, they are thrown into prison. We would expect them to feel sorry for themselves and angry at the injustice. Amazingly, to their fellow prisoners and to their jailer, they did not indulge in self-pity or bitterness. Despite their sore and aching bodies, they sang and prayed to the one true God. They were in fact filled with the Holy Spirit and that changed everything.

²⁵ 'About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.' The powers that be had done all they could against Paul and Silas, they had not reckoned with the power from on high. At the beginning we saw the supernatural in the poor slave girl. Now we see the power of God unleashed in force against the powers of evil. The poor jailer is standing right in the middle of this. If the prisoners escape he is responsible, in this society there is only one course open to him!

²⁷ 'When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.'

This jailer knows nothing of Christian forgiveness and love. He soon will!

²⁸ 'But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.'²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'³¹ They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you

will be saved, you and your household.' ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.'

After hearing of Jesus from Paul and Silas his response, like that of Lydia, is instantaneous. 'What must I do to be saved?' baptism for him and his whole household follows. He, like Lydia, does something about it. He washes their wounds and cares for them in his own house and he is quite aware of the risks involved in doing that. The Holy Spirit of God in action turns lives around. The disciples and these missionaries could do little in their own strength but in the strength of God they can literally do wonders.

Captivity is, to an extent, a state of mind. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, had vibrant and powerful ministries despite the fact they were behind bars. Paul and Silas never felt that they were imprisoned. They were free because of a faith that no earthly circumstance could touch. They didn't need to escape because they didn't believe they were captured.

Freedom is not only the state of not being in prison. It is also the ability to exercise self-determination, to chase dreams, risk failure and pursue success, attitude and belief are so important: Escape is about inner freedom from that which traps us: the thoughts, doubts and questions, misgivings that prevent us from becoming the people of faith that we can be. Sadly the bullies of this world add to this and we all encounter them. Jesus is stronger than 'the world' and like those followers of Jesus, with him we are truly free and can achieve so much more than we ever could on our own.

Paul and Silas stand up for the truth and won't be intimidated. We are told later in the story that in the morning the magistrates, who realise they had gone too far, want them released secretly and to hush it all up. Paul's reply was - No way, you treated us shamefully and unjustly. We are Roman Citizens and innocent. So take us out yourselves. Which the magistrates did and apologised! One of my favourite Bible verses is John 8:32 "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" And Paul's reaction is a real illustration of that. This has to be our guide in life. It takes great courage. But to stand up for your truth is the only way.

In this account, the spirit-possessed girl was released from the power of darkness. The jailer was so amazed his whole way of life changed, for he too was a prisoner in his own jail, a prisoner of fear. Now he and his whole household are free because they have turned to God.

So too, do we find liberty from the things that hold us back. When our focus is on God, revealed to us through Christ, we find the promise of a better life of wholeness and fullness. God calls us to do great things, offering the means and will to do them. When we accept the freedom that Christ offers, we can leave behind the earthly prisons.

This is a prayer scratched on the wall of a prison cell in Cologne during the Second World War.

I believe in the sun,
even when it does not shine.

I believe in love,
even when I cannot feel it.

I believe in God,
even when he is silent.

God frees all who seek him. By giving us the strength of the Holy Spirit we are with him in whatever troubles we face.

'My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose went forth and followed thee.' Charles Wesley

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