

A sermon on John 17:6-19

This passage from John's Gospel comes from the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples on the last evening before his death. In John's Gospel it is virtually the last thing Jesus does before his arrest in Gethsemane. It's plainly a prayer for those who had become followers of Jesus during his ministry, but equally clearly it extends to encompass all who would become followers of Jesus in the future. All of us are included in this prayer of Jesus. *We* are (in the words of the prayer) those whom God the Father has given to Jesus, those who *belong* to God and to Jesus, those whom Jesus asks his Father to protect and to consecrate. These prayers of Jesus are for us, and, what's more, we can depend on it that Jesus has never stopped praying these prayers for us. In the presence of God, to which Jesus has gone, he continues to intercede for us. Our whole life as Christians is upheld by the prayer that Jesus prays for us always.

Jesus' prayer here is specific and focused: "I pray for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, because they belong to you" (v 9). Words that may well puzzle us or even offend us. Why does Jesus not pray for the world? After all, this is the Gospel which tells us, in famous words, that God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son. In chapter 17 Jesus is approaching the moment when God will give him up to death because of God's love for the world. Why does Jesus pray only for his disciples? I want to leave that question hanging for the moment. We'll return to it. But notice something else in those words. What Jesus undoubtedly does is to *distinguish* his disciples from what he calls the world. And that distinction runs through the whole passage we read. Let's look at something of what that distinction means, under two headings that seem to me the keys to what Jesus is saying here: the *identity* of Jesus' disciples and the *mission* of Jesus' disciples.

First, *identity*. What distinguishes the disciples from the world is very simply that they belong to Jesus and do not belong to the world. On that Jesus' prayer is emphatically repetitive. Jesus' disciples are in the world but they don't *belong* to it. In other words they don't conform to the world's values, their ultimate loyalties are not those of the world, they don't bow down to the idols the world worships. To instance some features of contemporary worldliness, we might say that followers of Jesus are not seduced by the idols of acquisitive individualism, hedonism, consumerism, careerism. What Jesus is even now praying for us, among other prayers, is that we should be protected from those things. The 'world' here means something like a system of values and life-commitments. It is what opposes God and God's values.

Jesus' disciples are different because they belong to Jesus. Belonging is something contemporary culture is rather ambiguous about. Belonging doesn't sit very well with the kind of freedom and autonomy people want and value. Belonging isn't the kind of relationship you can opt in and out of as you please. It suggests commitment and being identified with. It clashes with the individualism of modern society. But there are also plenty of signs that - amid the contemporary breakdown of community, family and committed relationships - people still long to belong. We were not made for freedom from belonging, but for freedom in belonging.

That is what Christians find in belonging to Jesus, which of course entails also belonging to one another. Jesus' disciples do not seek an autonomous kind of identity in themselves, they find their identity in belonging to Jesus. This is the primary thing that distinguishes them from the world - not, in the first place, how they live or what they do, but who they belong to. They are God's people, Jesus' people.

And from that, of course, must come qualities of life and relating, ways of being oneself and ways of being a community, that derive from Jesus. In contrast to acquisitive individualism, there will be generosity and sharing; in place of the trivialization of life that much of our culture evinces, there will be passion and commitment; in place of the culture of blame and recrimination and scapegoating, there will be compassion and forgiveness; in the face of the commercialization and degradation of sexuality, there will be chastity and married love; instead of the exploitation and destruction of the earth, there will be love and care for all of God's creation.

Or so it should be. Is it really so? Aren't many of the evils I've just listed rampant within the churches? Aren't many of the good things I've listed found outside the churches, sometimes more impressively than among Christians? The latter point certainly shouldn't worry us, we should be glad of it. Let's keep hold of the fact that the primary point about the followers of Jesus is not a negative one. The *primary* point is not that they do not belong to the world (true as that is), but that they *do* belong to Jesus. That will keep us from the holier-than-thou need to see nothing but evil in the world in order to be able to see ourselves as different, separated from all that. The primary point is the thoroughly positive one: that Christians find their identity in belonging to Jesus. That belonging is what must keep us constantly making choices for God and against whatever evils tempt us and spoil the world in which we live.

In the world without belonging to it. So easily the church teeters in one direction or the other. Either so concerned with protecting itself against the world that it withdraws into anxious or sanctimonious, inward-looking sectarianism. Or else so concerned to be with those outside the church that it compromises its calling in mere assimilation to the world. In Jesus' parabolic terms, either the lamp hidden under a bushel or the salt that has lost its savour. Either so self-enclosed as to be of no use to people in the world, or so assimilated to the world as to have nothing distinctive to contribute. The way through that dilemma is to remember that the church's identity lies in belonging to Jesus. The way of Jesus' followers is the way of Jesus himself - the Jesus of the Gospels who moved freely wherever his love was needed, compromising himself in the eyes of the holier-than-thou, but disturbing and attracting precisely by being so positively different from the ordinary way of the world. To belong to Jesus requires the courage to be different, to be like Jesus, actually *for the sake of the world*. And to belong to Jesus sets us free to be in the world, where people need us, where God needs us, without succumbing to the false gods to whom too many in our societies are enslaved.

I said Jesus in this prayer is concerned about the *mission* as well as the identity of his followers. In fact, I've already brought in mission without using the word. In the prayer Jesus says that, as the Father sent him into the world, so Jesus has sent his

disciples into the world. Again the distinction between Jesus' disciples and the world is clear, but again it is distinctiveness not in withdrawal but in the service of others, the way that Jesus himself modeled for us. To belong to Jesus is to take part in his mission from God to the world, to live out that divine love for the world that moved God to give up his Son. Now perhaps we can see why Jesus in this prayer does not pray for the world but for his disciples. It is because he is at this point entrusting the disciples with his own mission to the world. He is not forgetting the world or writing it off. His concern for others takes the form here of praying for his disciples to be faithful in making known and passing on his love to others. It is a measure of the extraordinary responsibility he lays on those who belong to him. Not as mere individuals, note, always as the community that comes into being through belonging to Jesus, always as a group or a community of Christians lives out its commitment to the way of Jesus in its own life and in its involvement with the world around it.

To sum up, then, how do those who belong to Jesus, as a community of Christians, manage the calling to be different and yet involved? There are two ways of being different: one is to focus on drawing boundaries between us and them, and that's the route to sectarian withdrawal. The other way to be different is to focus not on the boundaries but on the centre, that is, on Jesus. The stronger our commitment to that centre the greater can be our openness to others. The more that from that centre we live out what it means to belong to Jesus, the more others will be drawn to the attraction and the challenge they can see in the way of Jesus as we live it. Similarly our involvement with others can be sustained from our belonging to Jesus. It will be an expression of Jesus' love, which would *fail* were it simply to fall in with the values and objectives of the world, but which can really reach out to others, really come alongside them, really be where they need us to be only when our faithfulness to the strong centre of our lives in Jesus enables it.

Jesus asks a lot from us, but that's exactly why he prays for us.