



St. Andrew's Church Great Cornard



Jamie Leaving

What an amazing gospel reading we have just heard.

Here is Jesus praying for his disciples. Praying to God the Father as he prepares to leave them. Jesus asking God to look after them.

“I’ve cared for these people”, Jesus prays. “Nurtured them, taught them, lived with them for three years. So please, God, look after them when I’m not around.”

I want to look at this prayer of Jesus, what we call the high priestly prayer of Jesus, from three different angles. And from three different time zones.

The first time zone is Holy Week of the first Easter. Jesus and his disciples are gathered in the upper room for the last supper. Jesus washes the disciples feet as a supreme example of the love-in-action that he’s been teaching them about for three years. Then Jesus gives his last instructions to the disciples.

And then comes today’s reading – the high priestly prayer. The last words before Jesus goes out to Gethsemane and is arrested and killed.

Look at how Jesus starts off this prayer: “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.”

I have made your name known. Jesus making God the Father’s name known.

Back in the Old Testament, God’s name was not allowed to be spoken, or written down. There were special gaps in the old scriptures – you weren’t allowed to speak the name of God.

Eventually God was referred to by his initials: YHWH, or Yahweh.

Who are you, the Israelites asked? But the only answer they ever got was “I am who I am”. They had to be content with an image of God as distant and mysterious. Clouded in mystery – it’s where we get pictures of God as an old grey beard on some distant cloud from.

Then along comes Jesus. And the most amazing realisation that the vulnerable baby born in a stable was God himself. This man from Nazareth was actually God. Jesus was making God known. And claiming to be the son of God.

He turned the “I am who I am” thing around: I am the good shepherd, Jesus said. I am the vine, I am the way, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life. I am the messiah. I am Jesus.

Jesus making God’s name known – if you want to know what God is like, then look at Jesus. That’s the Christian faith in a nutshell. Look at Jesus, God in human likeness, believe the things he said, and do the things he did.

“I have made your name known”, Jesus said. And his followers have made God’s name known down the centuries since then.

So that's the first time zone – Jesus in that upper room – making God's name known.

Fast forward now about 60 years.

Its AD 90 and there are small groups of followers of Jesus scattered around the Mediterranean. These followers are starting to be called Christians – and were set up by the first disciples as they were scattered by various persecutions.

One group was led by the disciple John, one of Jesus' inner circle, and it was this group that collected the stories about Jesus into what we now know as the gospel of John.

They also wrote letters and three of them are in our bible called 1 John, 2 John and ... you guessed it, 3 John. We read a piece from 1 John this morning.

This small church is getting attacked by people around it. The Christians are trying to follow the teaching of Jesus, but they are getting attacked by what they call "the world".

They are trying to follow the way, the truth and the life of Jesus, but they are getting attacked by the world – by the evil one.

The tone of John's gospel is often about this opposition between the church and the world – good and bad, dark and light, truth and lies.

And 1 John today talked of: "...whoever has the Son has life, and whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

This church knows that Jesus left his disciples, including their leader, John, and ascended to heaven. They too are left behind on earth. Left in the world. And yet they don't feel like they really belong in the world either – they keep getting attacked, after all.

So they look back on Jesus words to the first disciples and see comfort in those words for themselves.

They realise that Jesus was praying for them, too. The world hates them, but Jesus asks God to protect them.

"I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one."

This small church – John's community – might well have just seen their own leader John, die. After all, if John was about 20 years old at the first Easter, he'd be an old man of 80 now. If he hasn't died, he surely will fairly soon. What will become of this young church when John is not with them?

So John's group look back at Jesus' prayer and own it for themselves. They were in the world – they hadn't gone to heaven – but they lived life differently as followers of Jesus. They marched to a different drum, we might say.

So their interpretation of Jesus' high priestly prayer is to ask that they may be kept holy despite losing their leader, that they may have joy regardless of persecution and difficulty. And that they may be kept safe while they are in a world of darkness, but not of the world because they walk in the light of Jesus Christ.

So that's two time zones. AD 33, and AD 90.

Fast forward with me now to AD 2009. To here and now in Great Cornard.

Three years of ministry and teaching. Three years of modelling and learning about loving and serving people. Of welcoming people in. Three years of growth and an excitement of being part of those who followed Jesus.

And then the leader announces that he is leaving.

Jamie is leaving.

We need to name that elephant in the room, don't we?

Jamie is leaving.

And here we have this most amazing gospel prayer all about leaving given for us today.

So all the things I've been saying about making God's name known can be applied to our situation. About carrying on the teaching of Jesus to make God's name known in this community.

And we can pick up the early church interpretation of asking to be kept true to their calling despite losing their leader. Of being kept safe, kept holy, and being kept joyful. Carrying on marching to a different drum.

But I think there's a third way we need to interpret this prayer of Jesus in St Andrew's today.

Jesus said that his followers are in the world, but not of the world. But they are not out of it either.

They are somewhere in the middle. Jesus says that his followers don't belong to the world, but he says "I am not asking you to take them out of the world..."

In the middle.

Maybe we are a bridge, even, between the world and the church.

And we are called to stay in the middle.

To create a neutral space between God and the world.

There will be other sermons over the coming months when I can say more about being in this middle ground, because I think it is such a rich idea.

When we are in one fixed place it can be hard to see other ways of looking at things. It can be hard to move our opinion, or move the way we do things. But shift to the uncertainty of the middle ground, and all kinds of new possibilities open up.

It can be a place of growth and change. Of opportunity. And a place of meeting and encounter.

You know, maybe the "interregnum" word is another elephant in the room, today?

But what is that but a time of being in the middle – between one vicar and the next.

A time when new possibilities open up. A time of growth and change. Of opportunity.

I dug out an essay last week that I wrote at college – 5,000 words on why I think interregnums are good for churches. So now we get the chance to put that into practice together.

Bring it on...to coin a phrase!

So we have looked at how this prayer of Jesus can be reinterpreted across three different time zones. Who says that the bible can't speak in different times and places?

We will come to terms with the leader saying he's leaving, and not knowing exactly what the future will hold.

We will come to terms with our calling to be in the middle.

And we are reassured to know that Jesus has prayed for his followers in exactly those circumstances.

Protect them, keep them safe, keep them holy and keep them joyful.

Amen.