

In the world but not of it?

St. Brandon's

John 17:6-19

13th May 2018

Imagine the following:

- The joy of a mixed race couple marrying each other in love, in Church, and in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- A mother and suckling child oblivious to anything but each other
- Strawberries and cream washed down with a glass of Chablis
- The sound of willow on leather on an English village green
- The aroma of azaleas filling the air
- A blaze of bluebells in a sun-spangled wood
- A rather average painting
- Some garden shears
- A Tupperware box
- A rather grey, chilly nothing sort of a day
- The smell of a fridge discovered 48 hours after an extended power cut
- Dandelions where they are not welcome
- Slugs in general and the one that ate my sunflower seedling in particular
- A teenager caught up in drug trafficking and its associated violence
- The cries of a child subjected to sexual abuse
- The desperate faces of people fleeing ethnic cleansing on religious grounds

As you'll have spotted, I was offering a spectrum of human experiences and things, starting from godly, loving, beautiful things, on to more neutral things, and then to horrid and finally evil things. The reason for doing so will, I hope, become clear.

But John, in our gospel reading, does not offer us a spectrum. Instead, as is typical in his gospel, he offers us opposites. Light vs. darkness, life vs. death, acceptance vs. rejection are some of the opposites he uses. And here he is giving Jesus words that seem to pitch His disciples vs. 'the world'. 'The world' occurs 13 times in this reasonably short reading, as well as elsewhere in the gospel, so it's obviously a key term which we need to understand. And while the Greek word 'kosmos' which is usually used could be taken as a neutral word (as in 'the earth'), here it is pretty obviously a morally charged word. Tom Wright defines it like this: "It means the world insofar as it has rebelled against God, has chosen darkness rather than light [one of the other opposites we've already seen], and has organized itself to oppose the creator ... [it means] 'the world' in this dark sense".¹ So this clearly links to some of the things at the end of my list.

And the contrast is with the disciples which, as the verse after the end of our reading makes clear (where Jesus continues his prayer not only on behalf of the disciples with Him there, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20)), includes us. And they and we as disciples are those who, He says, came from the world, but no longer belong to the world, who are indeed hated by the world because we do not belong to it, and who therefore need protection from the evil one, and who receive that protection and are sanctified in the truth – in other words we are those who are set apart, consecrated, made holy. We are those, therefore, who naturally associate with all those godly, loving, beautiful things at the beginning of my list, and are repelled by, wouldn't associate with or get involved with all the nasty things at the end; we're set apart from all of that.

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, SPCK, 2002, p.95.

Now I don't know about you, but I feel a bit uncomfortable with this. It feels like I'm being removed from the world (I no longer belong here), and set up on a pedestal which I am bound to fall off. It sounds as though I'm being set apart from other people as though I'm rather better than them – no wonder the world might hate me. It makes it sound like it's me vs. the world – opposites. And not only do I feel that this is setting me up to fail, but I also rather like 'the world' – not in the dark sense, not in its evil, but in so many other ways I want to celebrate all that this fantastic universe and planet and the people on it are and offer. And I live daily with the not so great, but equally not so bad, bits of the world, the neutral things in the middle of my list. And I'm not always sure where the dividing line between 'good' at one extreme, and 'evil' at the other lies. Somewhere around dandelions and slugs, clearly(!), but the world I experience is often grey rather than black and white.

Well, let's go on a bit, before we come back to that. Because, having set up the opposites – disciples vs. the world – Jesus through John says more about this. Yes, as disciples of Jesus we do not belong to the world, but we are still in it – Jesus says, "And now I am no longer in the world", implying His death, resurrection and ascension, His impending departure, "but they are in the world". And associated with that Jesus does not ask his Father to take them / us out of 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". So, although set apart from the world in one sense, we are not being plucked out of it; we remain firmly in it.

But then more than that, Jesus sends us into the world: "As you [Father] have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world". And that, of course, might remind us of Jesus' words earlier in John's gospel: "For God so loved the world that He gave [sent] his only Son" (3:16). Now clearly there, while the same Greek word 'kosmos' is used, Jesus is not saying that God loves all the evil in the world, but that He loves His creation and everyone in it as His children, while hating the evil that is done by them. And just as God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us into the world.

Now, again, I don't know about you, but I feel a bit uncomfortable with this. Not so much with remaining in the world, that's OK (though remembering that that really means being sent into the darkness of the world), but being sent into the world makes it sound a bit as though I'm again rather better than 'them', have something to tell 'them' which 'they' need to know and respond to, or else.

Well, in a sense I've both explored what this is all about, and made it more problematic rather than less. Is there a way through all of this? And I recall Rick (remember him, he was the previous incumbent ...?) speaking of distinctiveness vs. engagement. He did so in comparing his previous church in Newcastle with us here in Brancepeth. In Newcastle he said it was very easy for the church and the Christians in it to be distinctive, to be different from the surrounding culture, and to be seen and recognised for that. The problem was then how to engage. By contrast here in Brancepeth, he said, it was very easy to engage, but thereby perhaps more difficult to be distinctive.

But those two words – distinctiveness and engagement – perhaps help. Because I think that what this passage is telling us is that it's very definitely both. Yes, we as Church and as Christians are and should be distinctive. But this is a distinctiveness not because we are somehow better than others – I think we all know that, even if those outside the Church sometimes try to portray us otherwise. Our distinctiveness comes from God Himself; it is God who sanctifies us in His truth, it is by God's grace that we find our true identity in Christ. This is none of our doing other than that we have accepted the invitation that God extends to everyone.

And, we are still very much in the world, and are called to engage with it. And if 'the world' really means wherever the world has organized itself in opposition to its creator, including drug trafficking, child sexual abuse, ethnic cleansing on religious grounds or otherwise, and so on and on, then being sent into it is by no

means a comfortable calling, and is quite likely to mean that that part of the world will hate us, and explains why we need the protection which Jesus prayed for us.

Today is the beginning of Christian Aid week, and we could, I think, have no better example of just what this all means in practice. It is *Christian* aid, distinctive in its origins, stemming from the love of God for His world which He calls us to share. It enables us to engage with the world around us, inviting people, many of whom wouldn't ordinarily engage with Church or the Christian faith, to do so. It raises money to enable the delivery of *aid* to some of the darkest places in the world, helping to fulfil part of what being sent into the world is all about.

But then Christian Aid and this passage also leave us with a challenge. In which ways do I / we need to respond more fully to the distinctiveness which God in Christ calls me / us to and enables in me / us? And in which ways do I / we need to engage more fully with the world around us, not just the bits we already appreciate and enjoy, but also the very significant darkness and evil that is also all around us?

And for both of these – distinctiveness and engagement – we will need the Holy Spirit.

But that's next week, of course.

Amen