

Pentecost Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

John 15:26 – 16:15

Contemplatio: Michael Wood. *The world is wrong about sin, righteousness and judgement*

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I have a quiet speculation that if you were to ask people who never goes near a church what the Christian faith is about, that we could get a similar response, in various forms. If someone was feeling prickly they might say, 'child abuse and anti-Gay'. If a person was feeling more kindly, then might say, 'well I guess most religions talk about loving your neighbour, so being Christian is about being nice to people', to which they would quickly add, quite rightly in my opinion, 'you don't need be religious or go to church to be nice to people'.

Most responders I think would probably frame their answer in terms of morality – decent human *behaviour*.

While it's true that being a follower of Jesus has very definite implications for the way we engage in *relationships*, the Gospel of John from which we heard tonight but such things into a very specific frame. What John is primarily interested in in Jesus - the Word of God....God's communication to us....a Word written not written in ink but in flesh and blood. John's main point is that in Jesus, God has completed God's project of making the a complete human being – the template upon which all other human beings, like you and me, are made. We are made in the image of Christ and the direction of our life is to grow INTO that image.

In recent weeks we have heard several extracts from what is commonly called Jesus's Last Discourse to his disciples before he is crucified, and this is another one tonight. It has three readers in mind – the first disciples, the early church and the church throughout history up to and including tonight. It speaks particularly to Christians who are being persecuted and dismissed and misunderstood, which is what was starting to happen for the first hearers of this Gospel. Jesus is speaking to a group of people who are starting to be scapegoated as he was scapegoated...which included Messianic Jews who were starting to be turfed out of their own synagogues because of their proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah.

To them Jesus says, *'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 kills you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God'*. Scapegoating, of course, is always underpinned by a self-righteous and good and even holy self-justification by a community of people which has become internally conflicted with each other. Calling Jesus The Messiah was a particularly destabilizing thing for the early Jesus followers to do within their synagogue communities.

Jesus comforts his listeners by saying that he will send an *Advocate* who will comfort them and teach them. Using the image of a law court, the Advocate is kind of like a 'defence attorney' who stands with an accused person to support them in the face of prosecuting attorney who is firing accusations. The word 'Satan' means the 'accuser'. So Jesus is sending the Spirit, the Advocate, to comfort and strengthen those were being accused and attacked.

So let us return to my first question about how people commonly think about what being a Jesus follower is about. We can easily slip into thinking it is primarily about law and morality. Not only is this off-track but it can be very damaging because as soon as we have law and morality we have the prospect of accusation. The law can very easily gets weaponised to demonise and exclude particular individuals or groups, as St Paul knew very well.

Given that Jesus is speaking to a group of people who will be ostracized and marginalised, Jesus makes three VERY interesting and quite complex statements about how the Holy Spirit, the Advocate will teach us. He says,

‘When the Advocate comes, he will prove the world WRONG about SIN and RIGHTEOUSNESS and JUDGEMENT’....three of the big religious terms which can so easily get weaponised (Sin; righteousness and judgement).

Then Jesus expands just a bit....

***The world is WRONG about Sin*** because the world does not believe in Jesus. The world (that is people generally) think that Sin means doing naughty things. But what Jesus is saying here is that the meaning of Sin is deeper. For John, Sin is to fail to recognise the deep love of the world which Jesus is revealing. IF we truly GOT how much we were loved and how Christ is trying to make us into human beings, an improvement in our fundamental relationships with each other would follow – because they would all be flowing out of this divine love to whom we are connected, like a branch to a vine. So our problem is, in the first instance, not doing naughty things but actually being disconnected to the source of our life.

***Secondly, the world is WRONG about righteousness*** because Jesus is going to the Father and disciples will see him not longer. Jesus is pointing here to the self-justifying righteousness of religious communities when we demonise, expel and exclude others. Those who killed Jesus did so with 100% righteous self-justification. And yet, Jesus said, that they were wrong because he is going to the Father – in other words, being raised from the dead. This is an extraordinary statement because in the minds of most good God-fearing religious folks, God does not raise sinners! Sinners stay dead, or even worse, get consigned to Hades. But in the case of Jesus, the one who the expelling community rejects, turns out to be absolutely innocent. We would be wrong to point the finger at them for the failure to discern Jesus properly. This text is addressed to US. If THEY could get it so wrong with Jesus then surely it would give us pause when we cast someone out on the basis of our own sense of righteousness. For this person is also, for all we know, being raised before us into God’s life.

***Thirdly, the world is WRONG about judgement*** because the ruler of this world has been condemned. The world generally understands judgement as a good and necessary thing (we don’t like being on the receiving end of it of course, but judgement of others is good and dandy – just try driving across town). After all, we’ve got to have rules don’t we? Where would we be without rules and regulations? And if someone breaks the rules then they need to be punished! But, says Jesus, that is a Satanic impulse and in taking that Satanic impulse upon himself on the cross – by becoming a victim of that Satanic impulse, he forgives us rather than accusing us.

All this reminds us of John 3. “I did not come into the world to condemn the world”. Even when we fall under the Satanic impulse and judge others as sinners, convinced of our goldy righteousness, we are forgiven, loved and set free.

This is what Pentecost is about. The Holy Spirit is not just giving us warm fuzzy feelings of cozy spirituality. The Holy Spirit leads us to see that in Jesus, through the Spirit, God is making us INTO Humans beings with the cruciform shape of Jesus loving the world to the end. This means knowing we are forgiven, liberated, set free and out of that reality we offer these things are free gifts to others. It’s a good life! A life worth living! An abundant life. Amen.