

John 17:1-11: Jesus Prays for the Disciples

Easter 7, 21st May 2023

Do you pray for people? If you are here, you probably do, whether occasionally or more methodically. In our intercessions later we will have space to remember those in need.

Jesus did. Here in John's gospel we see him praying to God the Father, praying for the disciples, and for those who follow them (us!). It is a somewhat challenging concept: God praying to God. But that is the mystery of the Trinity: God the Son praying to God the Father.

John 17 comes as the end of a long section about the Last Supper, John 13-16. The other gospels have the Last Supper, with Jesus predicting his betrayal by Judas and Peter's denial, and the first communion. John expands this with several long dialogues by Jesus. As Mark said a few weeks ago when looking at the raising of Lazarus, John's gospel is more stylised, and has been meditated over more than the other gospels. John has spent many years praying over and pondering what he heard from Jesus, and arranges it in his gospel to bring out important themes.

There is a lot of familiar sayings in these few chapters:

- *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*
- *In my Father's house there are many dwelling places (rooms)... I go to prepare a place for you.*
- *I am the Way, and the truth, and the life.*
- *I am the vine, you are the branches.*
- *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.*
- *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.*

Then comes chapter 17, which is Jesus' prayer, just before he sets off for Gethsemane and his arrest. It is a momentous moment, a turning point, and he starts by saying 'the hour has come'. This is the end of his wider ministry, and Jesus has basically passed on his teaching to the disciples. Further on in this passage he says 'I am no longer in the world': it will only be in the brief period after the resurrection, in a different form, that they will see him again.

So, to the prayer. It is wide ranging, with sweeping themes that will guide the disciples as they take over: glory, word, belief, eternal life.

Glory

'Glory' is a word we use quite a lot in liturgy (*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit*), so we have a feeling for what it means, but it is quite hard to define. In Hebrew, glory is something that weighty, that matters. Its presence is often highlighted by visible signs – 'and glory shone around' the angels in the nativity story – but the signs are not the main thing. In John's gospel it has to do with authority, greatness. Jesus aim is to glorify the Father, the Father glorifies the Son, and Jesus passes that glory on to the disciples.

Word

Jesus has passed on the Father's words to the disciples. And 'word' has a wider meaning that sounds or collections of letters. We remember the beginning of John's gospel: *in the beginning was the Word*, referring to Jesus as the Word. In passing on the Father's word, Jesus has made him known, made his name known. And the word is truth (v17), and the disciples are to be made holy in the truth.

Belief

Is the response to the word. They have believed that you sent me (v8). It is not just hearing the word that is needed, but absorbing it and accepting it.

Eternal life

Eternal life is what we receive. And it is not primarily talking about eternity, about playing a harp on a cloud forever, or whatever. It is more a state of being. *This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (v3).*

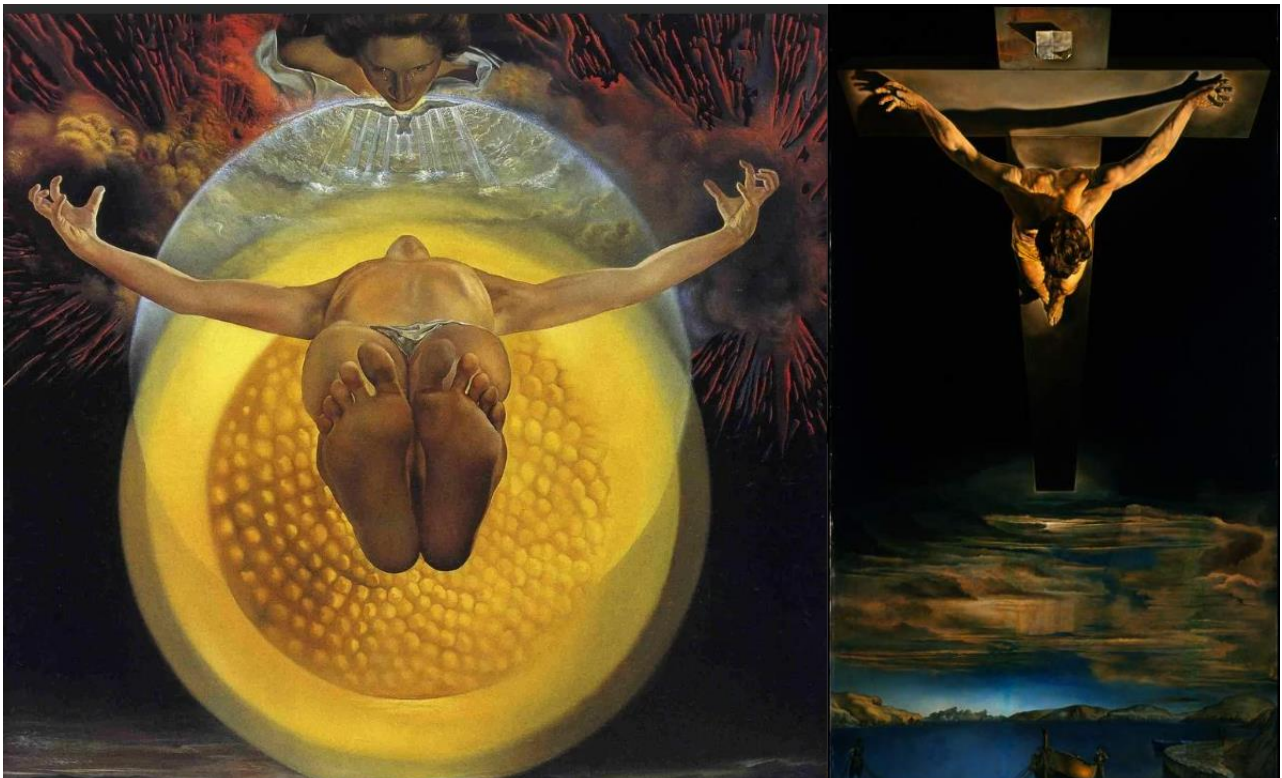
In Jesus' prayer, all these things cascade from the Father to the Son, to the disciples, to us. Jesus receives glory from the Father, and gives it to the disciples. He is glorified in the disciples. The Father delegated his message to Jesus. Jesus now delegates it to his disciples. He has passed on the Father's words, his truth, and they have believed it. He has made the Father's name known, they and we are to make Jesus know.

This year, our granddaughter, Maya, started school. While the first day at primary school may be a challenge for the child, it is seriously traumatic for the parents. It is an emotional time, as you hand them over and watch them go in by themselves. You have brought them up as best you can, but now they are on their own. You are not there to comfort them when they fall over, help them deal with difficult circumstances, guide them, protect them.

Jesus must have felt a bit like this. The disciples were going to be on their own. It was down to them now. He had taught them as far as he could. He had lived with them, walked with them, eaten with them, shown them the Father, demonstrated how to be and behave. And in this prayer, he is letting them go. It is going to be tough. In the short-term, very tough, seeing him die, seeing the apparent end of everything. But then there is such a big job to do, and he will not be there. He prays for them: *protect them in your name.*

In this prayer, Jesus is looking forward not just to his death and resurrection, but beyond that to the Ascension, which we celebrated last Thursday. Ascension was Jesus final earthly departure, walking out of the playground for good.

It is quite difficult to find an image of the ascension that does not look faintly ridiculous. Jesus shooting off into the sky like a Superman. Feet going through the ceiling of the church in Walsingham. But I found this, which is more abstract, by Salvador Dali. It is called the Ascension of Christ (1958).



You may recognise the style of that painting from this painting: Christ of Saint John of the Cross (1951), also by Dali. Rachel and I saw this picture 10 days ago; it's in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery in Glasgow. In the past I have felt uncertain about this picture, not sure whether it was a serious presentation of the crucifixion, as it does not include the nails or the crown of thorns, or any signs of suffering. Salvador Dali was an eccentric, talkative, flamboyant artist, who painted some great but strange paintings. In the display at the Kelvingrove, it talked about how Dali had lost his faith, and then returned to it. He then wanted to paint religious art from a cosmic, scientific perspective, and he met the then pope and received his blessing for this. He wanted a depiction of the crucifixion to be beautiful. So, this is a strongly devotional picture.

Back to the ascension. This painting carries some of the majesty, the glory, of the Ascension. Dali painted it after what he called a 'cosmic dream'. The thing that looks like a sunflower is the nucleus of an atom. It is not a retreat from the world, not Jesus going into retirement. It is him returning to his glory, to be with the Father, where he continues to intercede for us.

A child's parents have to leave the child at the school gates. Jesus did not leave us, but sent the Holy Spirit, to be his permanent presence with us, to guide and teach. The Spirit is called the Comforter, and it is a comfort, as is the knowledge that Jesus prays for us.

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St. Stephen.

John 17

Jesus Prays for the Disciples

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

6 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 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. 11 And 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.

Acts 1

The Ascension of Jesus

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' 7 He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.