

John 17:6-19 In the world but not of the world

*Tim Anderson 27/3/22*

The world is full of talk about identity.  
Do you identify as male or female or something else?  
Do you identify as homosexual or heterosexual?  
Do you identify as indigenous or non indigenous?  
Are you black, brown, yellow or white?  
And gosh there are plenty of other identity markers.  
Are you vaxxed or unvaxxed?  
Thankfully that identity marker is fading a bit from view.  
All this identity talk  
seems designed to enable people to claim status as a victim.  
Because if you can lay claim to being a victim,  
then that gives you a group to identify with,  
your fellow victims in whatever narrative you choose,  
and it gives you special rights despise others.  
It's a charming world we live in.

Well Jesus is praying to the Father.  
And in today's section of the prayer,  
he's praying for his disciples.  
I'm going to apply this pretty much directly to us.  
He is talking about the disciples who were with him at the time.  
In the reading that Rod will preach on next week,  
Jesus will move on to talking about us directly.  
But that passage seems to broaden Jesus prayer for the disciples  
to encompass believers like us who have come later.  
So I think it's fair to read today's passage and think about ourselves.  
And in it, we are given our identity.  
It's not male or female.  
It's not homosexual or heterosexual.  
In first century terms, it's not Jew or Gentile.  
If you're a believer,  
your primary identity is Christian.

And if you identify as Christian,  
 then you are not a victim but a treasure.  
 And you don't have a special right to despise others,  
 you have a special calling to be despised by others.

There are three paragraphs in our reading.  
 So we'll look at it under three headings.  
 Verses 6-8, the people we are.  
 Verses 9-12, the protection we need.  
 Verses 13-19, the life we lead.

So verses 6-8, the people we are.

That is, our identity.

What is our identity?

17:6, Jesus prays, "I have revealed you  
 to those whom you gave me out of the world,  
 they were yours;  
 you gave them to me  
 and they have obeyed your word."

So that tells us four things about our identity as Christians.

In chronological order,

1. We belonged to God the Father.

We were the Father's.

Oftentimes we think of our identity as a Christian  
 begins with our responding to the gospel.

This tells us that our identity began long before that.

Before you were even a twinkle in your earthly father's eye,  
 your heavenly father claimed you as his own.

2. God the Father gave you to Jesus.

"those you gave me out of the world"

This is where I'm making the claim that you are a treasure.

God the Father gave you to God the Son.

The Father doesn't give the Son junk.

He gives him what he values.

His treasures.

1 Peter 2:9 calls us God's special possession.  
Jesus must think it's very important that the Father gave him believers  
because he says it three times in this prayer.

Verses 2, 6 and 9.

They each say 'those you have given me'.

3. Jesus revealed the Father to you.

"I have revealed you"

You couldn't have put your faith in God  
unless Jesus revealed God to you.

It's not so much that God is invisible.

He is invisible,

but he can be seen through what he has done.

The problem is with our vision.

We can't recognise God's works,

even though our noses were rubbed in them,

unless Jesus reveals them to us.

Have you ever had the experience of not being able to see something,  
and it was staring at you the whole time?

Emdwyn was walking round the house

looking for her mobile phone the other day.

Turns out she couldn't find where she'd put it down  
because she was holding it in her hand.

That's what it's like for humans to recognise God.

We can't do it unless he is revealed to us.

In the book of Acts,

something like scales fell from the eyes of the apostle Paul.

The restoration of his sight was a metaphor

for his receiving the spiritual sight to know God.

In 2 Cor 4:4 he says,

"The god of this age (that means the devil)

has blinded the minds of unbelievers,

so that they cannot see the light of the gospel

that displays the glory of Christ."

The devil makes people spiritually blind

unless God reveals himself.

4. We respond by faith.

"They have obeyed your word"

Obedying God's Word is putting your faith in Jesus.

We might think about Jesus' disciples,

and say, "well they did a bit of a ham fisted job of obeying God's word."

But see, it's not about whether Peter denied Jesus,

or Thomas doubted Jesus,

or James and John wanted to be at this right and left in his glory.

It's that when Jesus said come follow me,

they came and they followed him and they didn't turn back.

Why is it important that we recognise

that we belonged to God and Jesus revealed God to us

before we ever put our faith in him?

It's about security and humility.

If it was just about my faith,

I would be questioning whether my faith was going to pass muster.

Have I really obeyed Jesus' words well enough?

It's easy enough for me to measure myself against other people

and find that I don't measure up.

I need the security of knowing that I belong to God.

But I also need it for humility.

Because it's easy enough for me to look at the world

and have a superior attitude.

Those people don't know God at all.

I must be better than them

because I obey God's word.

But I only obey God's word because I belong to God

and because Jesus has revealed God to me.

So it's not my merit at all.

Well that's the people we are.

We are Christians.

Next the protection we need.

17:9 Jesus says,

"I pray for them.

I am not praying for the world,  
but for those you have given me,  
for they are yours."

Jesus is praying for us because we belong to the Father.

That makes us worth praying for.

So Jesus is praying for us.

What does he ask for?

Well not that we would be rich and famous.

Not that we would be healthy and happy.

But he prays for protection.

17:11 "Holy Father protect them by the power of your name,"

In the case of the disciples who were with Jesus,

they needed the Father's protection

because Jesus had been with them,

protecting them up until now.

And he was returning to the Father.

He wouldn't be around to protect them anymore.

And so Jesus prays that the Father would protect them from now on.

What do we need protection from?

Is it from coronavirus?

Or from nuclear war?

Or just the mundane dangers of life like heart disease?

Well no, none of the above.

We can tell what we are being protected from by looking at verse 12.

17:12 "While I was with them,

I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.

None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction

so that Scripture would be fulfilled."

What are we protected from?

It has to be from falling away.

Because the example of someone who wasn't protected was Judas.

Not that Judas ever belonged to the Father.

He was doomed to destruction from the beginning.  
 But safety is defined by not going the way of Judas.  
 You are protected if you are not destroyed like Judas.  
 Because when you get to heaven,  
 Judas is not going to be there.

Why doesn't Jesus pray for protection for his disciples  
 from the normal perils of life?

Well because we are all going to die of something.  
 All of Jesus' 12 disciples apart from John died as martyrs.  
 Jesus isn't praying that they would be spared that.  
 He's praying that when we die,  
 we will be welcomed into our eternal home.

Why do we need protection?

17:11 "I will remain in the world no longer,  
 but they are still in the world,"

We need protection because we are in the world,  
 and the world is a hostile place.

It's hostile towards our faith.

The world loves dead fish that float downstream.

Dead fish don't push back

when the world tries to get us to adopt its values.

But when we are obedient to Jesus' word,  
 then the world will be a hostile place.

It will do anything to get us to switch teams.

And so Jesus prays for the Father to protect us.

I sometimes wonder why it is

that I don't experience more of the hostility that Jesus tells us to expect.

Could it be that my faith is insipid

and so the world is happy enough to let me live my life undisturbed?

But I don't think this is the case.

When we face hostility for our faith,

it needs to be actually because of our faith.

God doesn't want us  
to have such a pugnacious attitude towards that world,  
that it's actually our demeanour that causes offence.  
It needs to be the gospel itself that causes the world's hatred, not us.  
Why don't we face more of that?  
Well I think we are beginning to in pockets.  
If you were a Christian university lecturer  
in a history or sociology department  
you may well face considerable hostility to the gospel at work.  
But generally speaking,  
Australian culture has a live and let live kind of attitude.  
And that's something for us to be grateful for.  
In the course of history,  
this level of tolerance towards the gospel in society  
is comparatively rare.  
And it's certainly not what you'd find right now  
in great swathes of Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa or Europe.

But the writing is on the wall.  
We are going to face more hostility here in the next generation.  
The flash point will come as Christians try to live faithfully  
what the Bible teaches about gender and sexuality.  
We are going to face some heat on that in the next generation.  
And Jesus prays for our protection.  
Not that we will be protected from facing heat.  
But that we will be protected from falling away when we do face heat.

The people we are -  
our identity is Christian.  
The protection we need -  
we need to be protected from the fate of Judas,  
falling away.  
Finally, the life we lead.  
Jesus has prayed for our protection.  
But there are a couple of possible ways

that you could protect something or someone.  
If we have young children coming over to visit,  
we put things that we are concerned about out of reach.  
It's just sensible.

You keep your precious things out of harm's way.  
We are God's precious things.  
So is he going to answer this prayer for protection  
by keeping us out of harm's way?

The answer is 'No.'

17:15 "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world  
but that you protect them from the evil one."

The Father could protect his treasures  
by taking them to heaven straight away.  
He could protect his treasures  
by encouraging them to form a community  
that is separate from the worldly community around them.

Some sort of Christian commune or something.

But that's not what Jesus is asking for.

Don't take them out of the world, Jesus says.

Why not?

His treasures would be safer if he took them to heaven straight away.  
They would be safer if they formed a community of the faithful  
and didn't allow themselves to be contaminated by the world.

Why not protect us by removing us from danger?

17:18 "As you sent me into the world,  
I have sent them into the world."

The Father didn't protect his own Son from danger.

He sent him into a hostile world,  
a world that would crucify him.

And Jesus sends us into the world also.

The reason he won't remove us from the world,  
is that he loves the world  
and he wants to snatch others from the path to destruction.

We are here with a mission.

We are sent into the world by Jesus.

We can't withdraw into a little Christian community.  
 And we certainly can't press the go directly to heaven,  
 do not pass Go, do not collect \$200 button.  
 We have a mission and that mission requires us to be in the world.  
 Really in the world.  
 As the Father sent Jesus,  
 Jesus sends us.  
 It does concern me  
 that Christian folk often do withdraw from the world.  
 Some Christian people don't have a single non Christian friend.  
 This danger is particularly acute for ministers.  
 That one reason why I value things  
 like our community meal and Kid's Hope.  
 These are places where a minister  
 can actually sit down and become friends with on Christians.  
 Alan Hoskin enjoyed his Bowls Club,  
 Philippa Hoskin enjoyed her walking group.  
 If you don't have a place in your life  
 where you can make friends with non Christians,  
 you may well have withdrawn from the world.  
 Jesus sends us into the world.  
 We are in the world but not of the world.  
 17:16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it."  
 How is the Father going to protect us from the world?  
 Not by removing us from it.  
 He will protect us by sanctifying us.  
 It's in verse 17.  
 "Sanctify them by the truth:  
 your word is truth."  
 And it's in verse 19,  
 "For them I sanctify myself,  
 that they too may be truly sanctified."  
 It's clear as you read the passage,  
 that our protection from the evil one comes from our being sanctified.  
 Which is good.

But it just begs the question,  
"What does it mean for us to be sanctified?"  
And that's a problem question for a couple of reasons.  
We don't use the word sanctify much.  
And even when we do,  
the way we use it is probably different from what Jesus means here.  
Let me explain.  
And it will help if you grab a pew Bible  
and have it open at our reading for this bit.  
My apologies but I just can't make this simple.

When theologians use the word sanctify,  
they usually mean growth in personal holiness.  
So for example, they might say,  
"Over the years, the Christian person's desire for worldly things  
gradually reduces as they are sanctified,  
and they desire more and more the things of God."  
It's talking about the process where we grow in godliness.  
That's the usual meaning of the word sanctify.  
Except in one place, and that place is the Bible.  
It's not a particularly helpful thing,  
but the word sanctify often means something different in the Bible  
to what it means when it's used by theologians.  
And normal people hardly use the word at all.  
Are you thoroughly confused?

But it's pretty easy to demonstrate in this passage  
that sanctify doesn't mean growth in godliness.  
Jesus says,  
17:19 "For them I sanctify myself,  
that they too may be truly sanctified."  
Jesus doesn't need to grow in godliness.  
So when he says he's sanctifying himself,  
he must mean something else.  
We need to return to the root of the word.

What is the root of the word sanctify?  
 It means 'set apart'.  
 You'd never say this,  
 but you could say,  
 "I'm sanctifying my good cutlery for when we have visitors over."  
 I'm setting it apart.  
 I'm not using it day to day but only in the times I've set it apart for.  
 So how is Jesus sanctified or set apart?  
 He's set apart to do the work the Father has sent him for.  
 In particular,  
 he is set apart to go to the cross and die for the sins of the world.  
 He sanctifies himself by completing the work he was sent to do.  
 That's why the verse about Jesus being sanctified  
 comes straight after the verse about him being sent.

So then, how are we sanctified?  
 We are sanctified by being set apart too.  
 Set apart from the world we live in.  
 Set apart to do what we have been sent to do by Jesus.  
 How do we get set apart?  
 17:17 "Sanctify them by your truth,  
 your word is truth."  
 God's word will set us apart to do the work he has sent us for.

Well it all sounds like a bit of an effort, doesn't it?  
 We need protection from the evil one.  
 We are protected  
 by being set apart to do the work we have been sent to do.  
 It almost sounds like we are the defenders of Mariupol.  
 We're grimly doing our duty  
 because that is the destiny the history has called us to.  
 And then when we finally succumb,  
 we will be welcomed into heaven.  
 But it's not grim.  
 Yes we are here for a serious task.

Proclaiming the gospel to a hostile world is no walk in the park.  
But what does Jesus say in verse 12,  
"I say these things while I am still in the world,  
so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them."  
There is a great joy in being set apart for God's work.  
We are actually designed to love and serve God.  
When we do what we are designed for,  
surprisingly it actually feels good.  
Who would have guessed it?  
Despite the very real opposition of the evil one,  
despite the hatred of the world,  
despite our need for protection,  
it still brings great joy to serve our loving Father.

The people we are:  
We are Christians.  
That's where we find our identity.  
The protection we need.  
Being kept safe from falling away by the power of Jesus name.  
The life we lead.  
A life set apart for serving God.  
A life sent to be in the world but not of the world.  
A life equipped by the truth of God's word to serve him.