

Session 2 Encountering Jesus in John

The true vine

John's gospel is an extraordinary document. Its richness never fails to inspire and feed and lead us deeper into the realities of discipleship, which for John is nothing other than being with Jesus. That richness is the result of a fusion of a number of factors. The first is that John is telling us an historical story – the Word became flesh (*sarx* in Greek), part of human history in a few short years in Palestine. It's a story of weddings and conversations, joy and delight in friendship, the cynical compromises of the powerful and confrontation with corruption and deep grief in the face of mortality. This is the real world, and we recognise it. The second is that John is writing from a post-Easter perspective. Even whilst he is telling us the story of the passion, he knows the ending, and that knowledge weaves in and out of the text from the prologue to the resurrection appearances. The third is that John was Jewish, probably writing just as the synagogue and the 'church' were beginning to split apart (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), and therefore the grand, overarching story of God's covenantal relationship with Israel was part of the way that he thought and wrote. Echoes of that big story can be heard on every page. The fourth is that John was a writer of exceptional ability. He uses words with the precision and intensity of a poet, plays with rhetorical devices like a novelist, and releases chords of allusion which lend compelling theological resonance to his narrative. Simplicity and depth are joined in a perfect marriage.

When we read John then, we encounter both the historical Jesus and the risen Christ, both the original disciples and the Johannine community, and they coalesce and separate with such subtlety that it is sometimes hard to know which is which. That makes reading both complex and rewarding. There are many themes in John's gospel, but one of the most important is his understanding of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The Dutch theologian Hans Burger terms it 'reciprocal inhabitation'¹. It has a 'hidden' quality because, understandably, it is accessible only to the experience of faith. John's dual focus, writing from a post-Easter faith perspective about pre-Easter events, helps raise the veil a little on this hiddenness.

As we've seen, John explores the relationship between Jesus and his followers by deploying a number of images – bread and manna (Jn 6), the good shepherd and his sheep (Jn 10), the vine and its branches (Jn 15). In their turn they lead us into a matrix of relationships between God the Father, Jesus, the Paraclete-Spirit, the individual believer and the 'Christian' community.² I want to use the vine image, which we find in the farewell discourse in chapter 15 as a gateway into John's understanding of the relationship between Jesus and his followers.

Coins minted during the short time of the Jewish revolt against Rome were stamped with an image of the vine. The vine was an instantly recognisable symbol for Israel.³ It is a picture that pervades the Old Testament. It is found in Hosea (10:1), in the Psalms (80:8-11) and most memorably in Isaiah's poem, which the NRSV subtitles 'The song of the unfruitful vineyard' (Isaiah 5:1-7). It is an image of the covenant that God made with Israel, and of

¹ Hans Burger *Being in Christ: a Biblical and systematic investigation in a Reformed perspective* (Oregon, Wipf and Stock 2009) p. 387

² This is probably an anachronistic description at this stage in the community's development, but I use it for clarity.

³ Lesslie Newbigin *The light has come: an exposition of the fourth gospel* (Edinburgh, Handsel Press 1982) p. 196

Israel's failure to keep that covenant. The tragedy is that the vine had failed to bear the expected fruit, yielding only wild grapes (Is 5:4), gone wild, degenerate (Jer 2:21).

The image is a picture of a relationship – God is the vinedresser, the gardener, the one who prunes, tends and nurtures. For John, of course, Jesus is the true vine, the embodiment of true, obedient, faithful Israel. By the time John uses this image it is a metaphor aspiring to the status of a parable, although it never quite gets that far. As John takes up this picture which was part of the mental furniture of his readers, he keeps relationships at the very centre of his mind – 'I am the true vine (says Jesus) and my Father is the vinedresser (Jn 15:1).

I want to pause over two closely related metaphors here. The first has to do with the work of God the vinedresser. He is pictured pruning the vine to make it yet more fruitful, and Jesus comments, 'You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.' (vv 2-3). John uses a word play - the same Greek verb (*kathairo*) means both 'pruned' and 'made clean'. The disciples are cleansed / pruned by Jesus' word. An attentive reader or listener would have caught an echo from the footwashing when Jesus tells Peter, 'One who has bathed... is entirely clean (*katharos*)' (Jn 13:10). Pruning and cleansing belong together, or to put it another way – being with Jesus is about becoming more fully the disciples he calls us to be.

I am, as my wife will confirm, no gardener. The best I aspire to is incompetent labourer. I am not allowed near the pruning shears. But I gather from listening to those who know, and from reading a bit, that pruning is an essential part of the operation. Unless the apple tree is properly pruned, it will grow all over the place and there will be fewer apples. Those who love roses tell me that all inwardly focused growth needs to be cut out to enable the rose bush to be what it is meant to be – a source of beautiful flowers. Its about getting rid of the unimportant and enabling the important. The same applies to vines apparently, and as I'm a fan of the fruit of the vine, I'm all for encouraging pruning vines. Translate that into theological terms and reflections about discipleship, and it becomes clear that this is about the life of the true vine which is Christ becoming more and more manifest in the quality of the branches.

That brings me to the second metaphor. Pruning is about cleansing, yes, but its also about 'abiding'. As Jesus explores this image of the vine, he is helping the disciples understand the meaning of the footwashing. He is working out the dynamics of the new community which was revealed there – if they are to wash one another's feet, if they are to be the companions of the risen Christ, if they are to live the new commandment of loving one another, they will only be able to do so if they 'abide in me as I abide in you' (15:4) This 'abiding' is one of John's most important concerns, and to one of the major word groups of the gospel - abiding. The verb which means 'abide', 'dwell', 'remain' 'endure' is used forty times in John's gospel, the majority clustered around the Farewell Discourse (ch 14-17).⁴ The verb '*meno*' first appears in these chapters in 14:10 to explain the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son – 'the Father who dwells in me does his work'.

It dominates this passage (15:1-7) about the vine – it is used eight times in the next nine verses, and describes a variety of relationships – the vine with its branches (v 4), Jesus and his followers (vv. 5-7), his word and the disciples (v 7), the disciples and Jesus' love (v 9),

⁴ Dorothy Lee *Flesh and glory: symbolism, gender and theology in the gospel of John* (New York, Crossroads 2002) p. 88

and Jesus' relationship with his Father (v. 10). There's something almost maternal about the image – abiding isn't an option, it's far more organic than that – its life-blood, placenta like.

Now, it is worth stopping a moment and asking what this 'abiding' produces. We find out in verses 11-17 – joy, and love, and friendship. Fruit that will last. For the moment let's do what John does and not speculate further about what that fruit might be. Abiding is fundamentally relationship, it's about living in God through Christ the vine – no longer servants but friends, filled with Christ's joy, and not forgetting that this is the farewell discourse – bound to God through the love of Christ who was to lay down his life for his friends – that is what verse 13 means. Forget the gratuitous sloganizing of those who wrenched the verse from its context to justify the sacrifice of so many young lives during the first world war.

Once the disciples become 'friends' of Jesus, they are as it were on the 'inside' of revelation. The concept of 'friends' carries some theological weight. The remarkable way in which Jesus replaces the master-slave relationship into friendship has clear echoes of Wisdom literature where those who respond to Wisdom's invitation to knowledge of God are termed 'friends of God'. It's an honourable tradition within the Hebrew Scriptures – Abraham and Moses are depicted as friends of God, in conversation with him, changing his mind. That lovely picture of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 includes the phrase 'I love those who love me / and those who seek me diligently find me', and John keys into it. Love is central – God so loved the world, Jesus loved his own to the end, and the new commandment for the new age is love one another as I have loved you. The love that drives the incarnation is the love that forges the church by transforming disciples into friends of God.

The true vine, then, is about understanding not power – the intimate knowing between Father and Son thrown open to all who believe. Abiding, remaining and friendship belong together in John's mind. Jesus' work is to draw believers into the communion of love and knowledge which he shares with the Father. It is about participation and union, about partaking in the life of God, being the 'friends' of Jesus. No greater love can be shown than what Jesus does on the cross – laying down his life for his friends. So this sharing in the life of God is cross-shaped. Friendship was highly prized in the ancient world. Dying for your friends was often presented as an ideal in ancient philosophy – Plato, Aristotle, Seneca all speak of it – but within this gospel it has moved from the ideal to the actual, for the cross is the origin of the community.

The community that results is charged to abide in the vine. If we return to the farewell discourse we can begin to flesh out what that means. Abide in the vine – do not let your hearts be troubled – this is the place I prepare for you. (Jn 14:1); do not let your hearts be troubled – abide in the peace that I give which is not as the world gives (14:27). Abiding in the vine is first of all about receiving all the benefits of Christ's passion. It is about acceptance, restfulness, peace. But the vine is not static, it is dynamic, organic, growing. Our experience of the risen Christ, John is telling us, is primarily one of joy and peace and delight. It is about growing in love of God along with all the other disciples of Christ who are joined in the vine, all being pruned and cleansed through the judiciousness of the choices God invites us to make to become more fully who God calls us to be. John's vine is, as we said yesterday, like Paul's 'body' without all those separate charisms and offices.⁵

How then, do we 'abide'? We need to note first of all the primary relationship is between Jesus and the Father – 'As the Father has loved me, so I have love you...' That takes us back

⁵ Lee *op cit* pp 93-97

to the mind blowing poem with which John prefaces his gospel, to the relationships within the trinity itself, to the Logos who was with God in the beginning. The initial sacred space, as it were, is that between God the Father and Jesus. That is Jesus' abiding space by right as Son, a relationship which John expresses as love. The disciples, who share that love in their relationship with each other, are drawn into that love, that abiding space. As Dorothy Lee writes, the disciples '...do not manufacture their own abiding, but are gathered into that which already exists, already flourishes, is already redolent with love and life'.⁶

But once that is clearly established, the relationship between Jesus and the disciples is reciprocal and mutual. Jesus instructs the disciples – 'abide in me as I abide in you'. The primacy of grace ('You did not choose me but I chose you' (v 16)) does not negate reciprocity. Just as we want to be with those who love us – our partners, children, friends, so we want to spend time with God, to enjoy and delight in the friendship of Christ.

Jean Vanier expresses it beautifully

'This friendship with Jesus is something deep but simple,
Like other friendships.
It is not a big, mystical experience or impressive apparitions;
It involves living day by day with Jesus
Walking with him, listening to him, following his desires
And being nourished by his words and by his body.
Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus
As we talk, meet and share with others,
As we accomplish work and try to live out projects
As we live with others in family
In community or as friends and companions,
As we do little gestures of love, kindness, affection and forgiveness,
Especially to those who are weak or in need,
We are with Jesus and reveal Jesus to others.'⁷

Let's now go back to the beginning and ask how we are incorporated into the vine. Early on in the gospel Jesus has a strange encounter which might help us explore that.

At night – a pregnant Johannine word – Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to see Jesus. Commentators are divided about Nicodemus – Gerard Sloyan talks about his 'earnest spinelessness', Tom Wright that he's the kind of person '...who suppose they have got things tidied up, labelled and sorted into neat piles', Newbigin that he's '...a man of standing and authority', a theologian with a big stake in the establishment', Temple that he's 'a highly placed ecclesiastic', Grayston that he's a 'reflective Jewish teacher of good repute', Vanier that '...he is a leader and is secure behind his power and certitudes' (74).⁸ All of which tells us that white male church leaders and theologians look at Nicodemus and see themselves

⁶ Lee *op cit* p 97

⁷ Jean Vanier *Drawn into the mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (New York, Paulist Press 2004) p 275

⁸ Gerard Sloyan *John* (Atlanta, John Knox Press 1988) p 44 Tom Wright *John for everyone: part 1 chapters 1-10* (London, SPCK 2002) p 30; in Lesslie Newbigin *The light has come: an exposition of the fourth gospel* (Edinburgh, Handsel Press 1982) p 36; William Temple *Readings in St John's gospel* (London, MacMillan 1955) p. 43; Kenneth Grayston *The gospel of John* (London, Epworth Press 1990) p.34; Vanier *op cit* p.74

looking back. And it has probably always been thus. Augustine thought that his timidity was a product of carnal mindedness (Edwards p 45 Homily 11:5), and Calvin commented:

‘From his coming by night we infer that he was very faint-hearted; his eyes were dazzled as it were by his own distinction. Perhaps, too, he was hindered by shame, for ambitious men think that their reputation is ruined if they once descend from the elevation of master to the rank of scholar. There was no doubt he was puffed up with a foolish opinion of his learning.’⁹

Those of us who are religious professionals recognise both ourselves and our peers. Nicodemus - a proper, trained, suitably qualified academic theologian – all learned articles and honorary doctorates – seeks out a theological conversation. Theologians are trained to recognise holiness and authenticity and Nicodemus has seen them in Jesus – ‘Rabbi’, he says teacher sent from God, for no one can do the signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’

I grew up in a household with my grandmother. Every so often her sister would come to stay. They were both deaf and sit either side of the fire having a conversation which was actually two parallel conversations because they weren’t hearing each other. John’s account of Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus echoes that because they weren’t hearing each other either. Nicodemus is caught in the theological circle of Pharisaism. You must be born ‘...of water and the Spirit.’ Nicodemus gets water, waters breaking before birth can happen. He knows he is his mother’s son, and therefore born into the family of Abraham, into the people of God. Nicodemus gets that. It’s the bedrock of his spirituality (cf 8:33)¹⁰. Re-birth doesn’t make sense because of the security of that profound, God-given identity. As far as he is concerned, ‘From above / again’ is otiose, and Jesus might just as well be talking of something as outlandish and Monty Pythonesque as a grown man re-entering a womb. And so it goes on – question countered by assertion, misunderstanding met with irony – ‘You a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’ (3:10).

I want to use a poem as a commentary on the encounter with Nicodemus. Its by Henry Vaughan and was written during the 1650s. Henry was a native Welsh speaker, born in the Usk Valley, a Royalist lawyer turned soldier in the Civil Wars turned physician, a devout member of the Church of England, and therefore on the losing side in the 1650s when the church he loved was dismantled, albeit in a piecemeal and rather desultory way. His brother Thomas, a priest with a deep interest in alchemy and the beginnings of science, was deprived of his living and made homeless. It was a hard, difficult time for the Vaughans and their co-religionists. His poetry is almost a spiritual primer for times of persecution, a provision of spiritual sustenance when access to public liturgy and confession was impossible. Vaughan’s Nicodemus is the opposite of the commentators. He is ‘wise Nicodemus’, ‘most blessed believer’, a man who ‘...know[s] his God by night’. The first thing to be said is that Vaughan’s perspective is an Easter perspective. He knows the whole story, that the Pharisee who came ‘by night’ was the same who later in the broad light of day when his colleagues were out cut legal corners demanded Jesus’ legal rights (7:51) and later still came with myrrh and aloes ‘weighing about a hundred pounds’ to bury his Lord (19:39), about eighty times

⁹ Quoted in Paul Cefalu *The Johannine) renaissance in early modern English literature and theology* (Oxford, OUP 2017) p 305

¹⁰ Sandra Schneiders ‘Born anew’ *Theology Today* 44 (July 1987) pp 189-96; reprinted in *Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the fourth gospel* (New York, Crossroads 1999) pp 117-126

what Mary had used in the anointing – a quantity and quality (as Tom Wright points out in his commentary) that would be used to bury a king. Just so.

Nicodemus then, for Vaughan, comes ‘by night’ (which would have been only prudent for a man in his position) not because of timidity but faith.

Through that pure Virgin-shrine,
That sacred veil drawn o’er thy glorious noon
That men might look and live as glow-worms shine
And face the moon,
Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.

In a sense he is making Nicodemus stand where he, the gospel writer, stands. The Word, the Light, was in the world, and the world did not know him, but John did, and Nicodemus did. Both understood incarnation, realised that the veil of flesh hid God’s glorious noon, and enabling human access to the holy God in the person of Jesus Christ. Vaughan riffs on Hebrews 10:19, where the writer explores the way in which the veil of flesh becomes the new and living way to God. Both John and Nicodemus recognise the hiddenness of God and revelation of God. Nicodemus comes that night because faith is rippling within him. As Pascal said, ‘Take comfort, you would not be looking for me if you had not already found me’.¹¹

‘In that land of darkness and blind eyes’ Nicodemus sees, and Vaughan, caught in the desolations of revolution and uncertainty recognised a fellow believer. He too had to operate in the crepuscular light of a spiritual dusk, surrounded by what he perceived to be the darkness and blind eyes of our Puritan ancestors. Ten years later, ironically, the tables were turned. But for the moment, Vaughan is numbered amongst the oppressed and, if we listen to his imagery, we discover that darkness, cold, solitariness, defeat, silence and night are the touching places for encountering God’s grace –

God’s silent, searching flight;
When my Lord’s head is filled with dew, and all
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night;
His still, soft call;
His knocking time; the soul’s dumb watch,
When Spirits their fair kindred catch.

Exquisitely beautiful, a breath-taking insight into God’s loving quest. Vaughan’s work is soaked in Scripture – we catch echoes of the Christ of *Revelation* standing at the door, knocking, and of the love song in the *Song of Songs* – ‘Open to me, my sister, my love/my dove, my perfect one:/for my heart is wet with dew/my locks with the drops of the night’. But it takes a critic who is as fine a poet as the late Geoffrey Hill to point out that Vaughan hears God coming ‘...like a mousling owl over the fields by the Usk, with ‘silent, searching flight’ and ‘still, soft call’. To be the ‘catch’ of Spirits is a fearful rapture.’¹²

11 Geoffrey Hill ‘A Pharisee to Pharisees: Reflections on Vaughn’s “The Night”’ *English* (June 1989, vol 38) pp. 97-113, accessed 25.01.19

12 *ibid*

Daylight, like most of life, is distracting, whirling, full of inconsequence, and Vaughan longs for the dusk and the dark, for

There is in God, some say,
A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! Where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.

Vaughan is taking us to the heart of the gospel, to the theology of God in the darkness, the *theologia crucis*, the hiddenness of God. The paradox that God is most truly God on Good Friday, that there is ‘a deep, but dazzling darkness’ in God.

There is a tension in the Christian experience of God between that hiddenness, that darkness, that sense that even our profoundest thought and most perceptive art can’t even begin to describe the wonder and mystery of God – immortal, invisible, in light inaccessible and all that – and the immanence of God, the sense that we catch a glimpse of God in the unfolding of the snowdrop, the wag of a dog’s tail and sun dissolving into the westward sea and are led from that towards the sacraments and faith. In the traditional language of spirituality it is the tension between the apophatic (beyond images) and the kataphatic (with images). Historically the Reformed tend to the first, wary always of images and idols, the Ignatian tradition with its reflection on consolation and desolation through the examination of the soul’s experience of everyday life towards the latter. In reality (or perhaps its just me) we swither between the two. Vaughan certainly does:

No mercy-seat of gold
No dead and dusty Cherub, nor carved stone,
But his own living works did my Lord hold
And lodge alone;
Where trees and herbs did watch and peep
And wonder, while Jews did sleep.

Abiding in the true vine is to share in the ambiguity of the incarnation which both reveals and veils God, it is to live in the tension between the way that we and the trees and herbs recognise their Lord ‘while Jews did sleep’, and to encounter with Nicodemus the ‘deep, but dazzling darkness’ of our God.

To live in the true vine can only happen, Jesus tells Nicodemus, if we are born ‘from above’. If Nicodemus has another theological gift for us, it is that through his surface misunderstanding he prompts Jesus to develop the idea of new birth. It is, of course, the clearest image of the motherhood of God in the NT. Sandra Schneiders comments, ‘Jesus was not speaking here of being “engendered” by God, as of a male principle, but being “born” of God as a female principle.’¹³ We are children of God, John tells us, God is our Father just as he was Jesus’ Father (20:17), but we are also born of the Spirit who is our Mother (cf. 1:13).

Discussion Groups

- How can we nurture our ‘abiding in Christ’ in the midst of busy ministries?

13 *ibid*

- What are our experiences of the hiddenness of God and the revelation of God? How are our contemporary Reformed spiritualities fed by both kataphatic and apophatic experiences of God?

So, we begin our journey of abiding by being born ‘from above’, and grafted into the vine of Christ, we grow into unity with him, along with all those other believers who are similarly engrafted. Nowhere in the gospel is this as intimately and profoundly probed as in the high priestly prayer in chapter 17.

John’s theology, like Paul’s, emerges from Christian experience. Like Paul, he knows that Christian experience cannot be fully explained without reference to the Father, to the Son, and the Spirit. In that sense he is a profoundly Trinitarian thinker. More than any other NT writer, he begins to probe and explore the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit.

First, there is a close intimacy in the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit. The Spirit descends on Jesus at baptism and ‘remains / abides’ (emeinen) with him (Jn 1:33). Later we discover that there is almost a ‘tandem’ relationship between them - both ‘come’ from the Father (Jn 15:26; 16:27f), both are given and sent by the Father (Jn 3:16f; 14:16,26), both teach (6:59; 7:14,28; 8:20; 14:26) and the world ‘recognises’ neither of them (Jn 14:17; 16:3).

Second, John depicts the Spirit as the ‘breath’ of Jesus (Jn 19:30 and 20:22), and they share the same title, Paraclete. Jesus describes the Spirit as another ‘Advocate’ (parakletos) in the gospel (Jn 14:6), so the implication is that he was the first. That is underlined in the first epistle of John where Jesus is also described as a ‘parakletos’ (I John 2:1) It is almost as if the Spirit is Jesus’ *alter ego*, or that the Spirit is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.¹⁴

Obviously this is a unique relationship because there is only one Trinity. What is fascinating though is the way in which this relationship flows outwards, for the Spirit’s work is also the creation of that new humanity which ‘receives’ Jesus and ‘knows’ him. Chapter 17 takes the analysis of these relationships to a new level of profundity. Many of John’s favourite themes are woven into the chapter’s fabric, like glory, truth, work, joy, sending, love. In this chapter the image of the vine turns into the beginnings of systematic theology as the prayer leads us into a consideration of the relationship between God the Father, Jesus and ‘...those whom you gave me from the world’ (Jn 17:6). It is a prolonged exploration of unity.

Oneness, unity is a theological assumption in John¹⁵. ‘The Jews’, John tells us, took up stones to kill Jesus because he proclaimed ‘The Father and I are one.’ (10:30). There is one flock and one shepherd (10:16). Jesus dies to gather into one all the children of God (11:52). The unity of Father and Son is the basis for the unity of his followers - Jesus prays ‘...may they be one as we are one’ (Jn 17:11 and 21).

We noted earlier that the primal theological space in John is the relationship between the Father and the Son, and that it is through their relationship with Jesus that his disciples, his friends, share that space. Jesus’ prayer opens the door to this space – ‘...As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...’ (17:21) Its worth taking a breath here, because this is astounding. This unity of believers isn’t simply analogous to the relationship between

¹⁴ J.D.G. Dunn *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, SCM 1975) pp.350-1 – I borrow Dunn’s analysis whilst dissenting from his conclusions.

¹⁵ For the oneness motif see Mark Appold *The oneness motif in the fourth gospel* (Tubingen, J.C.B. Mohr 1976) pp. 11-13

Father and Son, it actually *participates* in it. Its not a copy of a masterpiece, it actually is the masterpiece. Its not an analogy, its reality. This is where the Christian community finds its origin and its home. Francis Watson argues, 'To be a Christian is to participate in the eternal relation of Jesus to the Father, along with others, and to know oneself and others within this relation.' If that were not enough it also means that God has made choices which mean that God God cannot be God without that human community – that is the implication of incarnation, and Jesus' inclusion of 'those whom you gave me' within the relationship he shares with the Father.'¹⁶ It is this that is eternal life, the goal of human living.

So, how does this participation work, how does it happen? A close reading of Jn 17 shows the prominence of a word group centred around 'name', 'word' and 'speech' – 'name' occurs four times, 'word' five times, and 'Father' is used as a name six times. It is in close relationship with the word group centred around 'knowing'. Jesus has made the Father's 'name' (his self-identity) known to those he has been given (17:6), and they have kept that word. That word led to their belief (17:8). That word, which is Jesus' words, are the source of their future joy (17:13) and of the world's hatred of them (17:14). That is why they need help and sanctification in the truth, which is God's word, and truth (17:17), and their word will bring others to belief (17:20). In the background, in this most richly symbolic gospel, is of course the Logos, the Word / made flesh.

This word and these words overlap with the ocean of words that make up our everyday human lives, yet they are different. They overlap with 'knowing that' (as do all words) and with 'knowing of' (as do some words). 'I would like a cup of tea' is a different linguistic proposition to 'I love you'. Through the words Jesus uses, the disciples 'know' that Jesus came from the Father (17:8) and was 'sent' by him (17:8b and 25), and that knowing that is inseparable from a knowing *of* the Father, which is eternal life – '...that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (17:3)

Participation in the Trinity then, is linguistically mediated. It comes through words, which are part of the materiality of things. It is bodily and fleshly.¹⁷ One would expect nothing else from a God who risks incarnation. And, as we know from earlier in the Farewell Discourse, once Jesus has departed from them, his presence and being will be mediated by the Paraclete / Spirit, who will enable them to bear witness in the midst of the world's hostility. Their unity is, after all, that the 'world may believe' (17:21), and in turn becomes enfolded into the oneness of the divine life.

A picture might help. This is Henri Matisse's *Dance II* (1909-10), painted for the Russian collector Segei Shuckin, one of the great patrons of the emergence of modern art. In 1909 Matisse gave an interview in which he suggested that photography had freed art from the need to copy nature, and now it could condense and synthesise and penetrate rather than reproduce reality. He produced two massive panels, this and companion piece called *Music*. They were met with incomprehension and fury – even that most perceptive of English art critics, Roger Fry, thought that it was like something his seven year old daughter could produce. When they were displayed in the Paris Salon in the autumn of 1909 the crowd hooted with laughter and the press cried 'paleolithic'. Another distinguished English critic,

¹⁶ Francis Watson 'Trinity and community: a reading of John 17' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol 1 no 2 (July 1999) pp. 168-184

¹⁷ Watson, *art cit.* These paragraphs draw heavily on this article

Lewis Hind, thought that the figures like cavemen, until he realised that everything else in the Salon was insipid beside these wonderful creations. Matisse said ‘I want anyone tired, worn down, driven to the limits of endurance, to find calm and repose in my painting’.¹⁸ He was making an art historical point¹⁹, but what strikes me is the echo of Christ’s words in Matthew 11:28 ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and I will give you rest’, and the Johannine Christ’s exhortation, ‘Let not your hearts be troubled’.

The *Visual Commentary on Scripture* chooses this picture as one of its ways of exegeting ch 17 – the unity is that of the divine perichoresis, the eternal dance of the trinity which flows through the lives of believers as they are caught up in the life of Christ. Crucially, there is a break in the circle as the bottom figure reaches out to join hands. This is ongoing, inclusive, all can be part of the dance, sharers in the elemental love of God in Christ.

Unity is dynamic, the shape and circle of the friends of Christ continually in flux, diverse beyond imagining, with a rhythm of inclusion we barely begin to comprehend. The sophistication of Matisse’s art echoes the sophistication of John’s theology.

What we shouldn’t do, and to often do, is leap from John’s high priestly prayer to our experience of Christian disunity. I think we need to live a little longer in John’s world and tease out what he is saying about unity. Only when we have done that can we begin to ponder its significance for our experience of disunity. John, even in his context, is stretching theological imaginations to their limit in his exploration of what it means to be ‘friends of Christ’ and how as his friends disciples participate in the life of the trinity.

All of that theological sophistication is worked out within the life of his community. Wherever John was written, Christians would inevitably have been a tiny minority in a robustly plural socio-religious culture. Tradition had it, probably wrongly according to modern scholarship, that it was written in Ephesus. If it had been, the theological and religious landscape would have been dominated by the cult of Diana of the Ephesians. John’s little flock would have been stuck in some unprepossessing little chapel up a dingy side-street. And wherever it was written, it wouldn’t have been much different.

You can catch some of that social tension if you listen very carefully to John’s language. A word which resonates through the gospel, but particularly the farewell discourse is ‘world’ (kosmos). It is used 77x in the gospel and 18x in ch 17. Sometimes it is used as a neutral description (eg. 9:32; 16:21; 21:25) but when used in significant theological contexts, it carries heavy freight. It is that massive, multi-faceted reality which embodies opposition to God’s intentions and leaves the people of God stuck up their dingy back alley. And yet the plot of the gospel is simple – God loves ‘the world’ despite its propensity to bend the knee to the Diana’s of this world and fashion social structures which exclude and objectify, and Jesus is sent to save it (Jn 3:16). Indeed in doing so he becomes flesh (sarx), the very stuff of the world. The incarnation means, as it were, that Jesus has ‘dual citizenship’ in two very different kingdoms. The disciples, not unnaturally, share in Jesus’ ‘dual citizenship’ – the world hates them just as it hated Jesus. That sense of dualism is culturally specific.

18 Hilary Spurling *Matisse the Master: a life of Henri Matisse volume 2 1909-1954* (London, Penguin 2006) pp.25,53, 51, 88; quotation from Matisse p 31

19 About the relationship between the order of the French classical tradition and the destructive and constructive tasks of modernism.

John's gospel developed in the culturally hybrid world of the first century Mediterranean and the High Priestly prayer needs to be understood within that context first. The ways in which John uses 'world' suggests that his experience was of danger, threat and persecution. His community has been excluded from the synagogues (9:22; 16:1-3), and, indeed, their sense of estrangement is such that, despite the fact that Jesus was a Jew, John's gospel has a distinctly anti-semitic overtone (which is in complete contrast, for example, to Paul's treatment of the Jews in Romans 9-11). If the separation from the synagogues provides one part of the context of the prayer, the religious pluralism of Graeco-Roman society is another. Although the gospels may have arisen with individual contexts, it is perfectly feasible that they could have been read and heard by many, not just Christians from other communities, but by those who wanted to know more of this Jesus and his followers.

John's linguistic universe is revealed in his understanding of 'the world' – it is a web of opposites – light and darkness, above and below, freedom and slavery, love and hate. The language of 'abiding' is set against that background. At a theological level it is, as we have seen, astonishingly profound, yet it also operates in a sociological way. It is a way of legitimating the life of his community, of affirming them as they gather to worship Jesus and proclaim him Lord in a church hall up a scruffy back street.

That legitimisation may have been necessary not only in the face of the synagogues as Judaism sought to establish its own boundaries after the destruction of the Temple, and the many religions of Rome, but also of other Christian groups. The evidence is slender, but the possibility must be allowed, given what we know of the plurality of earliest Christianity.²⁰ If John is read in that kind of context, we can see that his understanding of unity was probably rather different to ours. It could even be that he is seeking to legitimate his own community against others rather than promote unity with them, which would mean that the prayer might have been originally used in John's church in exactly the opposite way to contemporary ecumenical readings which use it to buttress arguments for either confessional or structural unity.²¹

So, a due caution about John 17 being whipped out instinctively during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

What we can be sure of is the theology that is the product of that context, Christ the true vine, Christ who gives us the incalculable gift of calling us his friends, open to the 'mouling God' who catches us up into communion with him, and calls us to realise the unity which that radical love creates. Barriers broken, a world-wide communion, rainbow diverse, various gifted. Christ invites the most extraordinary and surprising people to join his dance. I know of no better description of that than the one given by the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe, in an address at a baptism:

'This community embraces saints and sinners: St Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, John Henry Newman, and also the Borgias, the Inquisition, people who persecuted the Jews and who did terrible things in the name of Christ. You cannot make a selection. You cannot pick and choose. It is all or nothing.

²⁰ See, for example, James D.G. Dunn *Unity and diversity in the New Testament* (London, SCM 1977)

²¹ Gert Malan 'Does John 17:11b, 21-23 refer to church unity?' *HTS Theological Studies* 67 (1) Art#857, accessed 22.vii.15 provides an admirable reading from a South African context which is rather more radical than the one presented here, but arrives at the same conclusion

So the voice of the Good Shepherd summons you saying, "Come on Charlie. Here you belong." Why? This vast communion of the good, the bad and the ugly, is a sign of the kingdom of God, in which all human beings are summoned to be at home. It is a sign because it has no claim to be a gathering of the great and the good. Jesus came to call sinners, and in this, at least, he was highly successful. As James Joyce says, "Here comes everyone."²²

A prayer of Cardinal Newman

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly,
That my life may only be a radiance of Yours.

Shine through me, and be so in me
That every soul I come in contact with
May feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus!

Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
So to shine as to be a light to others;
The light, O Jesus will be all from You; none of it will be mine;
It will be you, shining on others through me.

Let me thus praise You the way You love best, by shining on those around me.
Let me preach You without preaching, not by words but by my example,
By the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do,
The evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You.

Amen.

²² 'Here comes Charlie Brown' *The Guardian* 25.05.2004, accessed 1.iii.18