

## **Sermon for Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May, Year B, Easter 7**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**John 17:6-19**

### **Sermon**

I don't know about you but for many years I've found myself torn between finding a way to escape from all the horrors of the world and getting stuck in to try to make the world a better place.

In my life that meant the constant tension between trying to find a way of life that protected my own sanity and gave me a peaceful community in which I could be myself, while also accepting that if good people hide from evil then evil will eventually win and take over everything.

Since my thirties I think every fibre of my being has been in search of a protected place of beauty and authentic community in which to enjoy and revel in the one wild and precious life we've been given. Over the years I've visited communes, eco-communities, protest camps, and of course I've been part of three different religious communities at Freeland in Oxfordshire, West Malling in Kent, and Sheldon in Devon. In every single one of these places – and especially in the religious houses – the question was always raised, both by those inside the community and outside it, "How is what we are doing here really helping the world?"

Even in the most wonderful and wise communities, there was always this sense of underlying guilt – the world is an awful mess and all we seem to be doing here is creating a small, gated garden hidden away, keeping all the nasty stuff out as best we can.

Many such communities protect themselves with extreme barriers-to-entry and austere lifestyles that put off everyone but the most committed and most willing to conform. It's much easier to live in a place where you have veto power over who else can join, and in the case of strict religious houses there's usually six years or more of formation for a novice before the community will consider allowing them to join permanently, by which time most of the individuality and rough edges that a novice might well have brought with them has been largely smoothed away.

Even then, many suppressed tensions run under the surface of the various communities I stayed with. One friend of mine who started his own eco-community decided that the only tolerable way to live in community was to have a single person in charge – a benevolent dictator, so to speak – and that dictator should, of course, be him!

While I naturally prefer a more collaborative and even consensus-based approach to leadership, I have to admit that sometimes in my experience the benevolent dictator model does have its merits – it is after all a model used by religious houses everywhere with their abbots and abbesses elected by their communities and given absolute power to be the shepherd of their community. Jesus's disciples also had this model in their community of course. No one seriously questioned Jesus' absolute leadership – they went where he directed – he was the sole teacher and so on, and it was only when Jesus knew he was about to be arrested that he quickly made it clear what the role of the Christian community was to be after he had gone back to be with the Father.

It must surely have been very tempting for the little band of Jesus-followers to find a quiet place in the wilderness to hang out and hide from their enemies among the Jewish and Roman leadership. This will have become especially pertinent by the time John's gospel was being written some 60 years after Jesus' death, when persecution was rampant and Christians were being hunted,

tortured and put to death for their faith. Oh, how they must have longed for a peaceful place where they could just be themselves and worship God and live a life of compassion, kindness, and mutual service, sharing Jesus's teachings with each other and breaking bread together. But Jesus in John's Gospel doesn't allow this. "The world hates my followers," Jesus prays to God, "but don't take them out of the world, rather protect them from the evil within it".

Jesus is clear that there is no running away from the reality of the world, but at the same time it is possible to have complete joy among themselves, even in times of great persecution.

His alternative solution to the problem of suffering in the world is not to try to make a perfect community separate from it – because who then would be good enough to join it? – but to be yeast in the dough, living in the middle of all the messy stuff of society without becoming entangled in it or poisoned by it.

Rather than becoming holy by living separately from the wicked society around us, Jesus-followers are called to become holy by staying close to God. Many Christian religious communities interpreted this in such a way that their members worked in towns and cities as nurses and schoolteachers and carers while maintaining a regular prayer life throughout the day and returning to the convent each night to eat and sleep. Others engaged with the world purely through prayer, and kept themselves enclosed in monasteries for their own sanity, though I always felt the tension there with Jesus' insistence that he was sending his followers into the world, just as the Father had sent Jesus into the world. Is putting up a big wall around your paradise and spending your life in quiet solitude praying for the world really what Jesus had in mind? Honestly, it's hard to say. Few people outside monasteries have the time to pray as assiduously as monks and nuns for the rest of us, but at the same time these lovely and beautiful souls have made themselves largely inaccessible to us.

As I said in my sermon last week: nothing transforms a person towards good more than hanging out with a good person. It perhaps doesn't help if the good people are all hidden from us, protected from us, even.

This passage in John's gospel, is, for me, the strongest argument for remaining engaged with a suffering world, and it was aimed at a community that for good reason was entirely exhausted by the world and really wanted to leave it far behind. What could be more appropriate for the situation we find ourselves in today, entwined as we are in a world full of hatred, war, greed, selfishness, and cruelty. Who among us has not felt despair at the way the world is turning, and powerlessness to do anything about it, especially as we grow older. The temptation to run away and hide has never been stronger.

But Jesus advocates something more enduring than cutting ourselves off from the world. He calls on us to stay close to God and his community of followers, which allows us to live faithfully and passionately in the world, not controlled and poisoned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and traumas. We can find our abundant life, our protection, our joy, and our healing even in the middle of a chaotic and crazy world if only we realise that Christ is also right beside us, praying with us on his knees.