

Readings Heart to Heart with the Father Fowlmere/Foxton
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
John 17:6-19

Introduction

I don't know if you have ever found yourself listening in to an intimate and personal conversation between two other people – or walked in when a couple are sharing an affectionate moment. It can feel very uncomfortable because we are witnessing something that was happening between two people and feels private.

This is how I sometimes feel when reading these chapters of John's Gospel. This account of Jesus's conversation with the disciples and then with his Father in prayer during the last supper are intensely personal and full of emotion. He is preparing to face the most difficult task he has ever had to perform – to give himself completely on the cross for us; he is preparing to leave the disciples, who although a somewhat motley crew were the men he had chosen to follow him and he had shared himself with and grown to love very much; and he was preparing to return to his Father in heaven.

There was (and still is) an intimate and unique relationship where they were two halves of the whole. We see a shadow of that sort of closeness in the best human relationships where a husband and wife or two very close friends complete each other and understand each other to the extent that they can sense what each other is thinking and feeling. When Jesus took on his human nature he separated himself from his father and to some extent a barrier came between them. Though they were still one in thought and purpose and in the gospels we see glimpses of the intimate relationship they shared, a relationship of complete trust and understanding.

Yet in order to return to the father Jesus was having to leave his disciples who he loved and had shared so much with. He had spent the past three years with them, teaching them, sharing himself with them, showing them who he was and demonstrating the kingdom to them and now he was about to leave them. It was a poignant and painful moment. He was preparing to face death on the cross and he was also preparing to leave his companions. These chapters of John's Gospel from 14-17 are incredibly poignant as Jesus firstly gives his disciples his final instructions and then turns to speak to his father in prayer bringing to him his concerns and those things that were on his heart.

The intimate relationship between Jesus and his father is embodied in his prayer and is also its subject matter. We see here the heart of God exposed, his purpose and mission revealed and his concerns for those people who follow him laid bare.

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Firstly Jesus talks to his father about himself and their relationship and he then goes on to talk about his followers and his concerns for them. The first part where he talks about himself is firstly a celebration and then a request. The two things are closely linked. Jesus is celebrating the fact that his work is done. Yes there is the huge and awful task awaiting him the next day. But he has completed the deeds and words which the father gave him to do. He has laid before his chosen disciples all that the father has given to him. That is the reason for the celebration and it is the ground for the request he now makes.

His request is that he may now be exalted, glorified, lifted up to that position alongside the father, which in Jewish tradition the Messiah, the Son of Man, was supposed to attain. The Messiah, according to the psalms, will rule a kingdom that stretches from sea to sea, from 'the river' to 'the ends of the earth' (psalm 72:8) In other words he will have a universal dominion. The prophet Daniel tells us that 'one like a son of man' will be exalted to share the throne of God himself (Daniel 7).

When the Messiah takes his seat, exalted over the world, then the age to come will truly have begun – that 'coming age' which Jewish prophets longed for, which Jewish sages taught would appear at the end of 'the present age'. It would be the time of new life, life with a new quality (not just quantity going on for ever and ever). It would in our inadequate phrase be eternal life. But eternal life that is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the everlasting one.

This 'eternal life', this life of the coming age that began with Christ's ascension into heaven, which we celebrated on Thursday, is not just something which people can have after their death. It isn't simply that in some future state the world will go on for ever and ever and we shall be part of it – which quite frankly I find a quite terrifying thought. The point is, rather, that this new sort of life has come to birth in the world in and through Jesus. Once he has completed the final victory over death itself, all his followers, all who trust him and believe that he has truly come from the father, and has truly unveiled the father's character and purpose – all of them can and will possess 'eternal life' right here and now.

This is Jesus' prayer – that he will be exalted so that his followers can experience that new quality of life that he came to win for them - as so often in scripture emphasis on God's sovereignty acts as an incentive to prayer, not a discouragement. It is because God is powerful and sovereign that we pray. We know he holds all things in his hands and can be trusted to bring about his purposes and meet our needs. So rather than sitting back and taking his intervention for granted we are spurred on, as Jesus was to pray for God's plans to be fulfilled.

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As you know I always have a cat and their well being and care is very important to me. When I go away I prefer to leave them in their own home with someone I trust caring for them than putting them in a cattery. Before I go I get everything ready and leave a list of very clear instructions for the kind cat sitter to follow. I do this, not because I don't trust the cat sitter but because I do. I know they would care for my loved pet just as I would myself. If I didn't trust them I wouldn't leave my cat with them!!

What Jesus now prays comes from the fact that he is going away. He is entrusting the disciples to the father that he has known and loved throughout his own earthly life, the father who he knows will care for them every bit as much as he has done himself. He is very much aware that the disciples are at risk. The world which hates them as it hated him will threaten and abuse them. They don't belong to it, but they are to be sent into it and they need protecting. That's what this prayer is about.

Jesus describes who his followers are. They are the ones that the father has given to him. They already belong to the father and he gave them to Jesus during his earthly ministry to care for and to teach. They have received Jesus' teaching and know that everything that Jesus is and has done came from the father. Jesus makes a distinction between his followers and what he calls 'the world'. This doesn't mean that his disciples are aliens or not human. He is not suggesting that they don't possess human ancestry, homes, families and physical bodies which will one day die and decay, though the fact that they belong to God does make them alien within the worldly environment.

What he means is that his followers have become new cleansed people through Jesus' calling and teaching, they are no longer part of the world that disobeys and opposes God's calling and teaching and that chooses darkness rather than light. Seen from within that world, Jesus is from elsewhere, so too are his followers and Jesus' concern is that when he leaves them they should be prevented from being pulled back into 'the world' with all its wickedness and rebellion.

During his public ministry Jesus has looked after them, teaching them and leading them, like a shepherd with his sheep. Now because he is coming to the father he is entrusting his father with the task of keeping them safe, in the same way I trust my cat sitter to keep my pet safe in my absence.

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What Jesus has already done for his followers is to 'keep' them safe in the father's name and to give them his word. So when he now entrusts them to his father's care it won't mean huge changes for them. Jesus has already taught them, so to speak, the table manners appropriate for the father's house. In praying for them now he is simply praying that what he has begun the father will gloriously complete.

This is a wonderful prayer for us and we can use it ourselves. As we celebrate Jesus' ascension, his rule in glory that began when he ascended into heaven we celebrate the fact that his work is complete. He died and rose from the dead to bring us and all those who believe and trust in him into an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. In doing so we have become holy – not in the way the word has come to be understood as a sort of over pious religiosity, a holier than thou priggishness, but in it's true and original sense of being set apart, consecrated, kept for special use. We have become God's chosen people who are called by him, cherished and cared for by him and taught by him through his written word and through the Holy Spirit he promised us.

As such we no longer fully belong within the world we live in because our priorities and values are radically different. That can be a frightening prospect because it means that day by day we are faced by challenges to our values and lifestyle and beliefs. Yet we don't need to fear because we have our heavenly father protecting, resourcing and encouraging us. In the same way that Jesus cared for his disciples during his time on earth; teaching them, advising them, showing them how to live and to serve God, comforting them and challenging them we have that care continuing through the Holy Spirit who guides, leads, encourages and protects us day by day. We have all the resources we need to live effective holy lives that please God and proclaim his love to those we live and work amongst. So let's take this prayer and make it our own, let's pray it for ourselves and for each other as we live as God's children in this alien and challenging world and in these demanding and difficult times.