



Waves of Love

Sunday 9 March 2025

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1 John 4: 7–21 John 17: 20–end

‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8, 16). That short phrase, repeated twice in our reading from the First Letter of John, sums up both a whole worldview and a surprising news story. Both the worldview and the news story are given at greater length in the Gospel of John. The First Letter of John (1 John) is an urgent message written to a community under the extreme pressures of internal division and external persecution. The setting is a great empire that ruled with brutal violence, enforced by the most powerful army the world had seen. The Romans in Palestine had recently slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Jews in the course of destroying Jerusalem and its Temple in the year 70 AD and after; and Christians were also being killed by them. In those circumstances, as also for many in today’s circumstances, it is hard to imagine a more unlikely and counter-cultural message than ‘God is love’. Yet this was the message then, and also, I believe, for now.

The worldview, centred on God and God’s love, is especially clear in the Gospel of John. John’s Prologue, the first 18 verses (perhaps the single most influential short text in Christian history), give the worldview’s three essentials. Its opening is: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1:1) That gives us an ultimate framework of God and all reality, and a confidence that we are part of a world that really has deep meaning, and there is reliable truth to be found. The Prologue’s conclusion is a picture of Jesus, the Son of God, ‘close to the Father’s heart’ (1:18) - in other words, Jesus utterly at one with God in love. This says: the deepest secret of our universe is this God, this love. And, at the centre of the Prologue, is the surprising news event, the testimony that is at the heart of Christian faith: ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’ (1:14) - and full also, as the rest of the Gospel shows, of love. *So, the deepest meaning and the deepest love come together in this person, who is at one with God and at one with us.* The astonishing news is that God is not only free to express who God is by living and loving among us as this unique person, but that this has actually happened.

There follows the Jesus-centred drama of the Gospel. First, Jesus does life-giving signs, including healing, feeding, and accompanying teaching, with much controversy. But everything culminates in what John calls ‘the hour’, the final weekend of the drama. This is when the climax of the shocking and surprising news story at the heart of Christianity

happens, These are the events at the end of Holy Week, towards which the forty days of Lent, that have just begun, are oriented: the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Yet, before John describes those events, he gives us more of the framework, the worldview, within which to understand them; and we are also given the essentials for living life within that vision of reality. This is all in the Farewell Discourses of Jesus in chapters 13-17. We have just heard the final seven verses of the final prayer of Jesus in chapter 17. For me, having spent over twenty years writing a commentary on the Gospel of John, I have emerged seeing this prayer of Jesus as the deepest chapter of the Bible.

Why? Because it gives the ultimate vision of the deepest meaning and the deepest love coming together through Jesus for us. What Jesus prays for, his deepest desire as he heads towards his death the next day, is *for us to be utterly united, in trust and love, with himself and his Father, and with each other, for the sake of the world God loves*. Just listen to him praying: 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you loved me... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them (that's us), and I in them (that's us).'

And, in the chapters leading up to that vision Jesus gives the core teaching, the essentials for us if we want to take part in this reality. As you move through Lent, you might consider slowly and reflectively reading and rereading Chapters 13-17 of John's Gospel, praying at the same time - prayer-reading, some wise teachers call it.

So, what are the essentials of this way of life?—According to Jesus, we are to shape our lives around three basic practices. First, and above all, there is loving. This is summed up in the new commandment: to love as Jesus has loved. And this is then intensified and deepened when in Chapter 15 Jesus repeats the command, calls his disciples his friends, and connects it with his death: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' (15:12-13) This teaching of love culminates in the final part of Jesus' prayer (our reading), his ultimate desire and vision: utter unity in love, with God and with each other, for the sake of the world God loves. Second, there is learning. 'Disciple' simply means 'learner'. The Farewell Discourses give wave after wave of teaching, and Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit, that he breathes into us with his words, will lead us into all the truth (16:13). Again, the culmination comes in the prayer of Jesus, who says: 'Sanctify them [dedicate them] in the truth; your word is truth.' (17:17) And, third, there is praying. Jesus gives repeated teaching on prayer in Chapters 14, 15 and 16, and then, in Chapter 17 he teaches it by example.

The beautiful thing about these three is that, whatever your practices up to now, you can begin each of them afresh today, and you can be sure that you will never never come to the end of them, never exhaust their riches: there is no end to loving, or to learning, or to praying. And the even more beautiful thing is how they are constantly in interplay with each other, and together are the deepest secret of a worthwhile life. Try them all this Lent through reading, praying, and living the Farewell Discourses of Jesus!

But that prayer of Jesus had opened with him speaking of finishing the work he had been given to do, completing his work of love. That happened the next day. This is the public event, the news story. Jesus was arrested by a combination of the most powerful religious

leaders in his society and the representatives of the greatest¹ political, economic and military empire the world had known up to that time. As Jesus faced the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, there were some shades of what happened in the Oval Office between Volodymyr Zelensky, Donald Trump, and J D Vance a couple of weeks ago. ‘Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?’ says Pilate to Jesus, who has just been mocked, flogged, humiliated. And Pilate exercised that life and death power. Jesus was crucified.

What was happening on that cross? John’s Gospel makes clear that that is the wrong question. When Pilate, faced with Jesus, asked, ‘What is truth?’ (18:38), readers of the Farewell Discourses know that he should have asked ‘Who is the truth?’² And when he asked ‘Where are you from?’ (19:9) readers know he should have asked, ‘Who are you from?’³ Likewise the key question about that cross is, not what, but who was happening on that cross? Three men were crucified that day. The decisive thing about the cross of Jesus was who was on it, someone utterly one with God and utterly one with us, in complete solidarity with all creation and all humanity in love. Injustice, sin, evil, suffering, and death happened to Jesus; but Jesus happened to injustice, sin, evil, suffering, and death. And the result of this unique, singular, unprecedented happening is the resurrection of Jesus, this person alive in a new way, still one with us, still one with God, and now inviting us into his way of love, as his disciples, learners, at one with him through prayer and worship and dedicated living, through loving God and loving our neighbours—and all of God’s creation.

Finally, you will be offered, as you leave this evening, a handout that I hope might accompany you through this Lent. On it are four texts. One is our Gospel reading, John 17:20-26 which I have suggested offers the ultimate vision of love, as opened up by Jesus on the night before his death. The second is a suggestion from my commentary on John’s Gospel, that you pray the Lord’s Prayer in the light of the prayer of Jesus in John 17, that deep, deep chapter. The third is our reading from the First Letter of John. It distils, for a community undergoing massive internal and external pressures, the three profound elements of the worldview and good news given at length in the Gospel of John: that we are utterly loved by God; that God’s love enables us in response to live lives of love; and that we are invited into this life and love through Jesus Christ who is utterly one with God and utterly one with us, in costly, sacrificial love. And the fourth is a poem by my favourite of all poets, a graduate of this College, George Herbert, who is portrayed in the window across from me now in this chapel. He is, I think, one of the greatest of all poets of love (as the Gospel and Letters of John understand love), and my hope and prayer is that you might not only let this poem accompany you during Lent, but that you might also, humbly and wholeheartedly, accept its invitation to sit and eat with Love.

¹ On greatness, the Farewell discourses of Jesus are counter-culturally clear: ‘So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet... No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ (13:14; 15:13) Foot-washing was a task for slaves, crucifixion a punishment for slaves.

² See John 14:6 - ‘Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”.’

³ See e.g. John 16:28 - ‘I came from the Father...’