

2 May 2021

**BIBLE READINGS**

Psalm 98 (responsively from New International Version)

Sing to the Lord a new song,

for he has done marvellous things;

**his right hand and his holy arm**

**have worked salvation for him.**

The Lord has made his salvation known

and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

**He has remembered his love**

**and his faithfulness to Israel;**

all the ends of the earth have seen

the salvation of our God.

**Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,**

**burst into jubilant song with music;**

make music to the Lord with the harp,

with the harp and the sound of singing,

**with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn –**

**shout for joy before the Lord, the King.**

Let the sea resound, and everything in it,

the world, and all who live in it.

**Let the rivers clap their hands,**

**let the mountains sing together for joy;**

let them sing before the Lord,

for he comes to judge the earth.

**He will judge the world in righteousness**

**and the peoples with equity.**

John 15:18–16:15

'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do

not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, “They hated me without a cause.”

‘When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

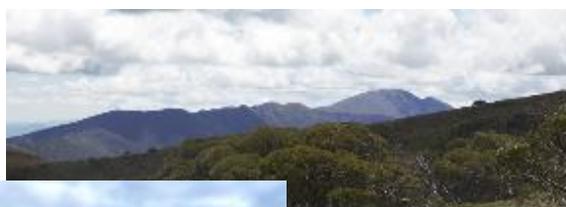
‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

‘I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, “Where are you going?” But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

## John 15:18-16:15 – Life after Jesus

The world we live in is **amazing** ... whether we think of majestic mountains, beautiful beaches or the diversity of animal and plant life. Human life is also pretty amazing in our diversity, creativity and resilience.



But there is another side to life in this world that is quite **awful**. Despite our intelligence, humans are slowly destroying our planet through greed and indifference. We watch on our TV screens as coronavirus runs rampant



through countries like India and Brazil bringing death and grief and we wonder at the inequalities between rich and poor.

Here in Australia we are so blessed with medical resources yet

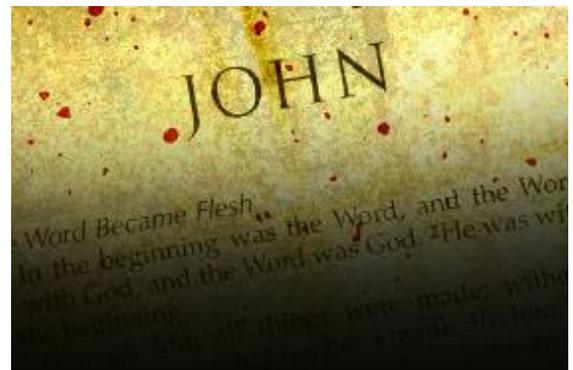
we worry whether it's safe to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine and about Covid escaping from hotel quarantine.



In the midst of all that is going on, we wonder where God might be at work and whether the world is our friend or our foe ...

These are questions that also occupied the mind of the Gospel writer John who wrote many years after the remarkable life and ministry of Jesus, when the Christian community was struggling to find its place in the world.

John was trying to paint a vision for life after Jesus.



As John writes, Jesus had come and revealed God's grace and truth, yet many people refused to hear or believe the message. Jesus had shared a life transforming message about love, yet followers of Jesus were now being persecuted and sometimes killed. In this difficult period, John recalls words of Jesus speaking about what will happen when he is no longer physically present with his followers.

John's Gospel is written from a very black and white perspective. If last week's message about abiding in Jesus the true vine and enjoying a close and growing relationship with God was the **good news**, then this week's reading that follows directly on is the **bad news**. It's a difficult passage that is rarely preached on, so our challenge today is to make some sense of the passage ... that moves straight from Jesus saying 'I give you these commands so that you may love one another' to this stark warning:

'if the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. ... if they persecuted me, they will persecute you ... those who kill you will think they are offering worship to God.'

I want to explore three questions that arise from the passage:

- Why this warning about rejection?
- Why does 'the world' so hate followers of Jesus?
- What help does Jesus offer us to live as authentic Christians?

The **warning** about rejection is similar to warnings in the other three Gospels about the need to take up one's cross if you want to follow Jesus. John spells out what this will look like in practice ... Jesus' followers will be thrown out of their former worship place, the Jewish synagogue, will be actively persecuted and may even be killed ... because of their faith in Jesus. This language reflects the current realities of John's community.

John suggests that Jesus was rejected because of his claims to be God's Son and to have a special and enduring relationship with God whom he called Father that enabled him to forgive sin, heal the sick and even raise the dead – all prerogatives of God alone. In some Muslim countries today, this belief in Jesus as God's Son is enough for Christians to be persecuted and killed. Similarly in Myanmar, Christians are actively persecuted by the Buddhist majority, which is the reason so many Chin people have fled from Myanmar.



For us in Australia the situation is much easier. Christian beliefs are generally tolerated – so long as they are kept **private** and not shared in the public sphere. Hence the controversy this week when some remarks made by our Prime Minister Scott Morrison at a Christian conference were shared online. He talked about a vision he'd received from God before the last election and about social media being the work of the



evil one. Commentators were quick to pounce on these remarks and remind the wider community that we are a **secular** society and that faith has no business in politics. The truth is that it's hard for a Christian voice to be heard or taken seriously in our national conversation.

The second question that today's passage raises is:

### Why does 'the world' so hate Christians?

The world here represents the power structures and people who strive to maintain their control over human life. Such people and powers have always been present. In the time of Jesus it was the Roman Empire and its armies. In our day it might be corporations like Google, Facebook and the Murdoch media empire. But it's also governments who control, for instance, who is allowed to enter and stay in the country and how Covid vaccines will be rolled out.



Why would those who wield such powers 'hate' followers of Jesus?

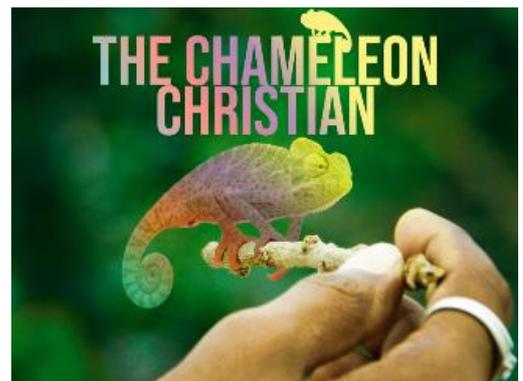
In rough terms, the values and aspirations of worldly powers are to encourage selfishness, greed and dependence, to rule with strength and violence if necessary, to have tight control over what others think and to reject calls for justice.

By contrast, Jesus makes clear that true disciples do not **belong** to the world in terms of adopting these values. Instead, Jesus has called disciples **out of** the world, to live according to the upside down and subversive values of God's kingdom – loving and serving others, offering welcome and hospitality to all and seeking fulfilment in following the way of Jesus. In John's black and white perspective, the wielders of power 'hate' the Christian approach because it threatens their authority and carefully constructed worldview.

The struggle for Christians down through history has been to find the right balance between living **in** the world yet not going along with its values. Some Christians have advocated **withdrawing** from the world. We might think of those who withdrew to monasteries or the Amish people in America. The thinking of such groups is to focus on loving God and loving other members of the Christian community. The focus is all inward. We might think of this approach as forming a **holy huddle** that seeks to avoid interaction with the world as much as possible.



The opposite approach is to blend into the world as much as possible by not saying or doing anything that may offend. I think of this approach as **chameleon Christianity** where Christians are virtually indistinguishable from those around them, speaking and acting just like everybody else and so becoming nearly invisible. And also becoming largely irrelevant. This was the approach championed during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was assumed that everyone accepted the values of Christianity.



The Gospel writer John suggests a third approach, which is the way of **authentic discipleship**, based on following the example of Jesus. John shows Jesus **engaging fully** with the world – with rich and poor, with women and men, with powerful leaders and with relative nobodies – but always offering an alternative way of living and questioning the status quo. In our passage



today, disciples are called to witness to this alternative truth ... which, as we have seen, may well result in rejection.

The third question from today's passage is this:

**what help does Jesus offer us to live as authentic Christians?**

This question has a ring of urgency in light of the fact that Jesus insists that he is going away ... most likely a reference to his ascension and return to be with God. So this whole passage is about life **after** Jesus, **after** he is no longer physically present with his disciples. It's written for people like us.

Jesus says it is good that I am going away because only then will I send the **Advocate**, the **Holy Spirit**, to you. Previously in this long farewell address, we are told that the Spirit will abide among the Christian community and will remind them of everything Jesus has taught. In our passage today, this role is expanded. The Spirit will not only make the teaching of Jesus fresh and relevant to the Christian community in their new situation, but will also have an active role in convincing the world about the truth claims of Jesus. This is important in helping our witness, when we struggle to find the right words to say to tell people about our faith in Jesus.



We are witnesses or signposts along the way, pointing people to the truth that God does indeed love them and wants to have relationship with them. But our role is not to beat people over the head with this truth ... rather it's to trust that the Spirit will use our faltering words and our limited actions to point people towards God. When the time is right we need to be ready to explain who Jesus is and how we have life in his name, but until then our role is to be salt and light, pointing the way to Jesus.

As we walk this journey – with God’s Spirit in our midst to comfort and guide us – there is the encouragement to keep loving one another – as this is a distinctive signpost to the presence of Jesus at work – but also to be aware that there are powers at work in the world that are hostile to the message and invitation of Jesus. This is not to alarm us but to help us be realistic – and to encourage us to rely on God’s Spirit to help us.