

MESSAGE Jesus prays for the church

BIBLE READINGS

John 17:1–24

Acts 1:1–14

We humans are social creatures and we find it hard when we are cut off from interaction with others. That's the main reason why the Covid lockdowns last year were so tough for many people – we missed seeing our family and friends.



It's why many of us find **separation** hard to deal with, whether this is a child leaving home or going overseas, a divorce or the decision that a loved one needs to move into residential aged care. There is loss and grief and sometimes guilt associated with such separations.

The other separation that causes huge ramifications to our sense of well-being is of course **death**, whether of our life partner, a parent, a close friend or a child or grandchild. Death causes a permanent separation in our relationship with the person and usually leaves a significant hole in our lives, whether the death was expected or not.



Where do we turn to find comfort in these situations of separation? These are some of the questions that lie behind the several chapters in John's Gospel that we've been working through, as Jesus tries to prepare the disciples for what life will be like after they are separated from him. He says that they will feel much like orphans and will experience pain, loss and shock.

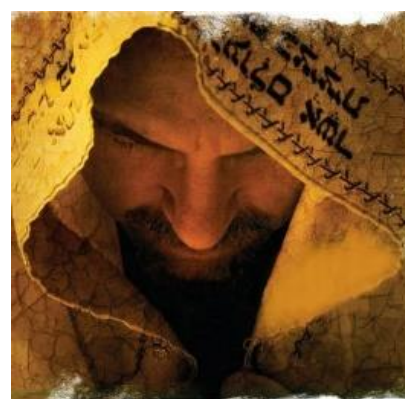


How does Jesus help prepare the disciples for this unexpected and unwelcome change? There are several intertwining strands to Jesus' message of hope in his long address:

- *They are to stay connected with him and with God through the gift of God's Spirit who will bring Jesus' ongoing presence to them and remind them of all that Jesus taught*
- *They are encouraged to continue loving one another – following the example of Jesus – as both a witness to the world and to build a strong community*
- *They are to be strengthened knowing that Jesus himself prays for them as they walk the journey of faith*

The final section in Jesus' long farewell address that we heard today is sometimes known as Jesus' **High Priestly Prayer** and is seen as the climax of his long pep talk to the disciples. The prayer splits into three main movements as Jesus prays for himself, for the disciples and finally for future disciples, namely the church. We'll come back to the content of the prayer in a minute ...

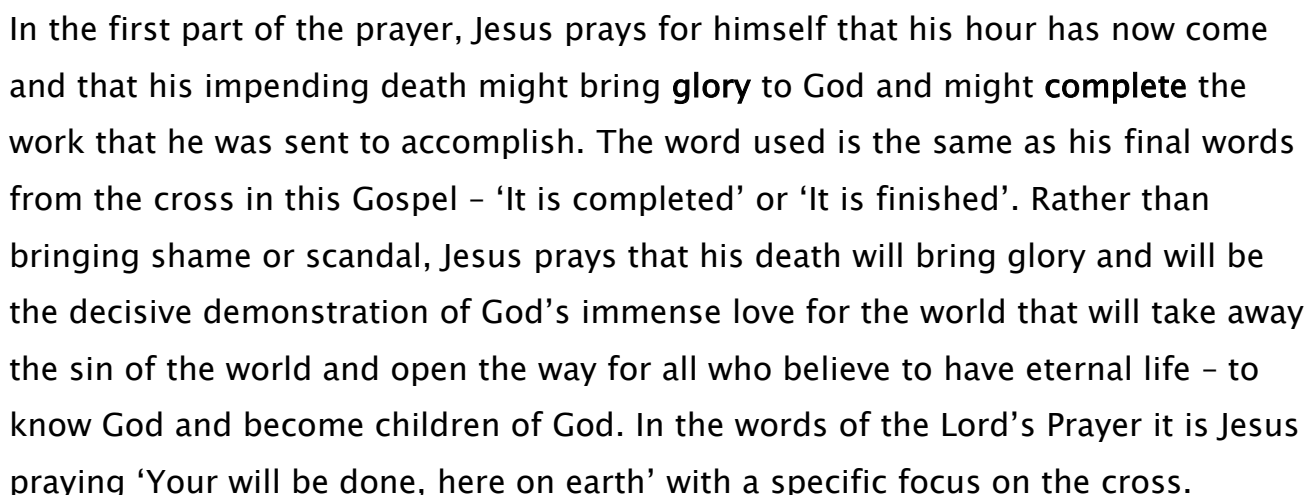
But first, what do we know about Jesus and prayer? We're told in the other Gospels that Jesus had a regular **habit** of prayer and would rise early on most days to pray alone. He prayed before major decisions such as choosing the Twelve disciples. He prayed when healing people and he prayed before significant events such as his arrest. So we know that Jesus was a person of prayer.



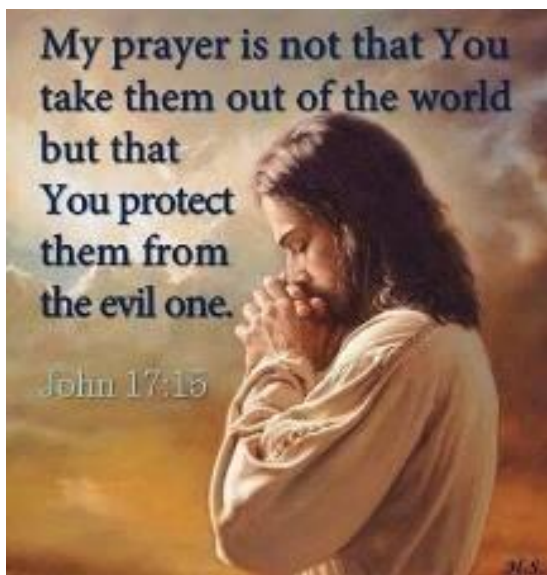
Yet we have very few actual examples of what or how he prayed. The disciples were also largely ignorant of Jesus' method of prayer and asked him one day about how they should pray. In response, Jesus outlines an approach to prayer that we know as the **Lord's Prayer**. This prayer features in many of our worship services and I'm sure also features in our personal devotions. For me, this is the prayer that I start

Which brings us to Jesus' prayer that is written down for us in this chapter of John's Gospel. At first glance, the words seem relatively simple but the ideas are complex and there is a degree of shorthand being assumed by the writer.

to bear in mind is that this is **John's equivalent of the Lord's Prayer** that appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It has multiple connections to other parts of John's Gospel and highlights John's particular perspective on Jesus.



Jesus also prays to be glorified in God's presence, which most likely refers to his **ascension** back to God – that we read about in the second reading from Acts today. According to the prologue of John's Gospel, Jesus was with God from the beginning and is now about to return to God. Jesus is not abandoning the disciples, however, but rather goes to prepare a place for us in heaven. We may hear echoes of the Lord's Prayer here, 'May your will be done, Lord, in heaven'.



In the second part of the prayer, **Jesus prays for the disciples**. Jesus is leaving but the disciples are to remain in the world. This will not be easy. Jesus says that the world will hate them. They will face temptations to conform to the ways of the world – and temptation to disown Jesus. So Jesus prays that God would protect them, especially from the evil one, and that God would sanctify them and keep them in the truth – especially the truth that God sent Jesus into the world to reveal God’s love. Modifying

the words of the Lord’s Prayer slightly ... ‘Save them from the time of trial and deliver them from the evil one’.

In the third part of the prayer, **Jesus prays for future disciples**, people like us. He prays that we would be **one**. This is often seen as a prayer for Christian unity or the basis of the ecumenical movement – for groups like the Maroondah Fellowship of Churches. In the case of the Uniting Church, this prayer of Jesus was one of the key drivers in bringing three separate denominations together, that our unity would be a witness to the world. I’m not sure that this impulse for unity has really worked though as most people view the Uniting Church as just another denomination.



But I suspect Jesus has something different in mind here, something **deeper**. He prays that we – the community of his followers – may dwell or live in God in a similar way that God dwells in Jesus and how Jesus lives in close relationship

with God.

Further, that we would experience God’s love in a similar way that Jesus

experienced God's love and would join the dance of the Trinity. For John, this lies at the heart of having **eternal life**, a life so entwined with God that we know God as intimately as Jesus knew God.



This is a bold prayer! We might wonder whether it's even possible or is only for super spiritual people or for a select group of saints through history. What I can tell you is that I have experienced such closeness to God on just a few occasions in my life and it is very precious, a feeling of being embraced by God's love and light and warmth in a way that overwhelms everything else and that makes you aware of another dimension to life beyond what we normally see and experience. It is a gift that we cannot demand or call up. It's an invitation into the inner life of God, sometimes called the dance of the Trinity. Instead of the words from the Lord's Prayer 'Give us today our daily bread', it's offering a different sort of nourishment – 'May they taste and experience true life as found within the very heart of God'.

This is the prayer of Jesus for us and the invitation to a deeper life with God and with Jesus through the Spirit. It's the invitation to eternal life that is open to us here and now and it's made possible through the life and death and love of Jesus and by the grace and love of God.

Let us pray ...

Loving God,

we know this life can be beautiful and difficult,
and sometimes both at the same time.

We echo Jesus' prayer that you do not take us **out of** the world,
but that you support and protect us while we are **in** the world.

We pray that you would remind us every day of the truth that your great love is for everyone, and that Jesus' message is for everyone.

Send us out to bear witness in word and deed
to your grace, goodness and love.

We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.