

# In but not Of the World

a sermon preached on the

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Sunday 24 May 2009

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecture: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

Do Christians belong in the world, or not? Our tradition and the Scriptures seem to give a conflicting message about this. "They do not belong to the world," Jesus prays to the Father in his 'high priestly prayer,' "just as I do not belong to the world."<sup>1</sup> "I have made your name known," Jesus prays, "to those whom you gave me from the world... I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those who gave me."<sup>2</sup> Which sounds like they came from the world but are now leaving it. However, "Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world," suggests they're not leaving yet. "The world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."<sup>3</sup> The effect of this logic seems to equate the world with evil, and that humans need to be removed from the evil world in order to be one with Jesus, and thus with God.

The consequences of all this are far-reaching – do Christians belong in the world, or not? How do we live, according to the traditional formula, 'in' the world but not 'of' it? What does it mean to belong in the world while attempting ourselves to leave it, and to take with us as many as possible – like all those sci-fi movies in which the hero and his group attempt to rescue as many as possible from the doomed planet, the most depressing distortion of the doctrines of both Ascension and eschaton. Is this where the Easter gospel finally leads us, into terminal opposition to the world, doing our best to put on a show of love for that which we actually despise and wish to leave? Are all our acts of love and charity nothing more than an entrance test for the inter-planetary escape module? Little wonder our history is so scarred with violent proselytisers and with such sectarian empire-making!

Well, it helps to recall that the doctrines of creation and incarnation have always affirmed life as good, this world as God's, so at least at the level of theology there is no support for the schizophrenia and the violent proselytising. In any case, the word used by the evangelist is not the Greek word for 'earth' which the evangelists would use as the opposite of the heavens,<sup>4</sup> but the word *κοσμος* *cosmos* which literally means the cosmic order, the universe - everything! Salvation must have something to do with our labour towards the development of the world, so loved by God, otherwise the world in itself doesn't actually matter and is nothing other than the backdrop upon which some religious war campaign is waged.

Even so, in spite of this tidy 'solution', actually our problem is not solved, the contradiction remains – proving only the limits of theological reasoning. The world and our selves may indeed be good and worthy of love, but deep in our being we know that the Johannine Jesus' prayer accurately describes how things *actually are* for us. At the root and core of our being we know there to be a subjective feeling of dividedness, of belonging and not belonging, very real and at times painful to the point of despair: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me," St Paul prayed out of his own inner dividedness, "but the Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made complete in weakness.'"<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is this inner truth of the human phenomenon to which the Johannine Jesus points, rather than to institutional and

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:16

<sup>2</sup> John 17:6a, 9b

<sup>3</sup> John 17:14b-15

<sup>4</sup> γῆς *gēs* earth, the opposite of οὐρανοῦς *ouranos* heaven

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:8-9

political statistics or to the geometry of three-decker universe cosmology?

The soul is a battleground, on which the life-and-death struggle of salvation is being played out. We know this, those of us who are alert and awake and honest, because *we feel it*. We do indeed live in the world, and we love the world as we are to love ourselves and our neighbours, and yet we are confronted by a sense of profound alienation, from ourselves, from others, from the cosmos. Disfigured and buried fragments of our personal histories are entombed deep within, rising up against us like an enemy when we least expect. How can we love that which seems, from our conscious vantage point, to so hamper our forward progress through life? In our desire to progress we attempt, by various means, to dis-member ourselves, imagining that if we can leave this or that bit 'behind', like a sailing ship throwing ballast we may be able to navigate across the shallow waters - only to discover that we need the very same ballast come life's raging storms. This unwanted, entombed, ballast of ours is actually the cosmos, the personal created order, from which we cannot ultimately be separated without losing our humanity. "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."<sup>6</sup>

So this conflict between being 'in' the world and not 'of' the world would seem to be the necessary condition for salvation, for the evolutionary development towards completion, totality, one-ness, union. Being one requires being separate. Totality requires complexity. Union requires differentiation. To say that is to speak in the language of paradox, of course, which, in spite of the increasingly use of the language of paradox by physicists, never fully satisfies pure rationality: "So that they may be one, as we are one... as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one..."<sup>7</sup> Jesus' high priestly prayer ministers to that inner tension which is his own subjective experience. Because he is the pioneer and perfecter of our salvation he ministers as priest to the paradox of our inner dividedness also.

The priest is the one who mediates, who stands in the place where the opposites meet, between heaven and earth, Spirit and flesh, Divine and human. But I am not now talking only about Jesus, or ordination in the church, but about the archetypal priest, the priest within all persons. If the priest, the priest in every person, refuses to remain in that tremendous conjunction of the opposites there is no tension, no evolutionary development, no union, no salvation.

As Jesus the great high priest of our humanity prays for the grace to endure this paradox within himself, he prays that we who are a 'royal priesthood, a holy nation' might also endure. So we do not pray to escape from the paradox of being in the world but not of the world. Rather, with Jesus as companion we pray for the gift of the promised *παρακλητος* *paracletos* in order to be mediators – to withstand being in the world but not of the world, which is the ground of salvation - until all may be one.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John 17:18

<sup>7</sup> John 17:11b, 21b, 23a

<sup>8</sup> John 21a