

The Gospel passage we have just heard is, for me, one of the most touching passages in the entire New Testament. Presented in John's Gospel just prior to the account of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion, it comes across as a powerful and tender expression of Jesus' concern for us.

As I hope you picked up as it was being read, the passage basically consisted of a prayer. A prayer that makes a solid statement about Jesus' perceptions and understanding of his purpose and about his relationship to his followers down through time.

In the context of this prayer, Jesus commits those who believe in him to the care of God his Father, and prays that they might be kept safe from evil and consecrated in truth, as he now goes on to the painful climax and conclusion of his mission. When we consider the situation of the world – whether the world his disciples faced, or the world we live in – we can understand Jesus' prayer to keep those whom he loves safe from evil. War, violence, destruction, eroding family systems, addictions, all are concrete expressions of the presence of evil in our world.

At the same time, however, there's something in this prayer that makes us – or at least me anyway – uncomfortable. It's how Jesus states over and over again the distinction between the *world* and *his followers* – between the *world* and *us*. It's as if his solution to the problem of evil is to pluck us up out of the world almost as a sort of escape. And that's disturbing – because we know escape is *never* the answer to our problems. We are *in* the world, whether that world reflects our values, our sense of right or wrong, or not.

So what, then, does he mean? How do we disassociate ourselves from the world, short of becoming a hermit?

A closer look at a phrase we've heard as Christians many times, may be instructive here: "We may indeed be *IN* the world, but we are not *OF* the world." Or, to turn it around backwards, as followers of Christ, we may not be *OF* the world, but, like it or not, we're *IN* it, and we have to draw on God's strength to cope with that.

What Jesus is really saying is, he wants to be on our side when we fall victim to this world's lies and unrealities. And if there's anything that *doesn't* mean, it's ignoring them. Indeed, it may mean intensively and painfully experiencing them – learning from them the hard lessons that help make us more resilient to the evil influences that have the power to destroy us.

Do you see the distinction here?

Jesus is saying, don't close your eyes to the realities that are out there. Don't lose sight of the fact that, in the world of political reality, or in matters of human justice, or even in our own family systems, the world can touch us in cruel ways. Just use that awareness, he says, to fight for the values, the realities, that have the power to comfort us in the pain and the sorrow the world can bring.

The ugly side of our world presents power, possessions, and pleasure as life's priorities. Jesus wants us to distance ourselves from such a life-view. To remain faithful to him in the face of evil and failure, which inevitably touch our lives and cause pain and heartache.

It is here where the matter of ***consecration in the truth*** comes in. In praying that we be consecrated in the truth, Jesus is asking the Father to make us holy *by means of* the truth. To bind us to himself, who IS the truth – who IS the way, the truth, and the life. To stand firm in the truth, even when it's so easy to slip into following the world's ways and get caught up in the world's lies.

But more than that, he wants to uphold us as a *people* of truth. A people whose truth, within this world of lies, becomes almost like leaven in the loaf – the force that has the power to work from within to make the structures of this world more just, more honest, more transformative and healing.

This means seeing and understanding God's love as revealed in Jesus, so fully, so strongly, that we become motivated to testify to it. Those of you were here Thursday at our Ascension Day service know that this is the thrust of the Gospel in Ascensiontide. Our mission is to get out there and spread the truth, "in Jerusalem (in our case, the Seacoast), but also in Judea and Samaria (that is, among our enemies), and unto the uttermost parts of the earth (perhaps, for us, our brothers and sisters at St. André's in Angola where I visited ten years ago next month, and where the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire remains in close partnership)."

Next week, in our Pentecost liturgy, we shall proclaim the power by which we are made able to carry on this redeeming work. We shall hear, in that liturgy, of the power of the Holy Spirit, the One who is the living embodiment of Christ's continued presence with us. But for now, the message is: *Catch that as your vision*. Look to do more than just be *protected* from evil. Be consecrated in the truth in order to *fight* evil. That's your apostolic mission. To bear witness to the fact that redemption is *possible* – and *has come* in Jesus Christ. Amen.