

In the Gospel passage Jesus states his most urgent hopes for his disciples. Shaped as a prayer, these verses have been referred to as Jesus' other Lord's Prayer, Jesus meant for his disciples – and for us two millennia later – to overhear his petitions.

Hours from the crucifixion, Jesus focuses precisely on what matters most from his entire ministry. For Jesus the culmination of his work is that we know God through his life and ministry. His final hopes are not a celebration of himself, but the recognition that his life and ministry are windows into God's love and saving purposes.

Jesus prays that people will come to know God through him. "Knowing" describes a powerful, active, confessional claim on our lives. Knowing God will be evident in our obedience to love, the singular commandment of this Gospel.

Jesus prays not for the whole world but for those whom he has taught and guided into knowledge and love of God. He prays confidently for their protection in a hostile world. Yet surely this passage leaves us wondering as to how we are to deal with exclusive language in this prayer that implies God's eternal life is not available to all.

At the time of this prayer the term 'world' refers to a dangerous and hostile place that opposes God's hopes for justice and love and mercy. While such dualism – them bad ; us good – is not unique to that particular community of believers, the wideness of God's mercy in many passages in scripture and the recognition that we believers also often oppose God's will mean that we do well to interpret this text more generously.

History has taught us that the belief danger is only outside the church is misplaced. We all need God's protection from our own worst impulses as well as from others whom God also loves. What we can rely upon, as Jesus did, is the assurance of God's grace and providential care.

In a time when great divisions threaten the unity of so many Christian communions, the poignancy of Jesus' prayer that we believers may be one is striking. Jesus prays from the context of the profound intimacy he enjoys with God, an intimacy that elsewhere in John's Gospel Jesus also ascribes to his relationship to the spirit of the paraclete, the advocate. Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit enjoy a positive interdependence that accommodates difference. Perhaps this early Trinitarian theme is suggestive for how we may imagine our oneness in Christ. It does not mean we must be identical in thought and practice, any more than the persons of the Trinity are in their dynamic interdependence.

We are to enjoy a positive interdependence that accommodates difference.

And differences test us. And there are many tests we can stumble over ... even fall into.

- Radically different interpretations of the wideness of God's love and the boundaries of the church;
- the full inclusion of all people; celebrating and affirming every people without discrimination and
- the deep and historically shaped emotions about the way God's vision for economic justice has implicated Christians.

Our oneness in Christ faces new challenges as we recognise the urgency of interfaith opportunities to repair and build relationships among the religious traditions and beyond. Especially in the context of increasing religious fundamentalism across Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

We do well to remember how Hebrew prophets came to understand that God's love transcends a particular people and place, to create one human community linked by a covenant of mutual responsibility.

The God of Abraham intends that all families of the earth be blessed.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his book "The Dignity of Difference," we need a theology of religions to help us recognise the image of God in the face of those who are not in our image. To find God in the faces of all humankind is a goal of the eternal life into which Jesus invites us to live our commitments now.

Asking God in prayer is the last thing Jesus did before his arrest. The last tender memory he gave his friends. He didn't awe them with a grand finale of miracles. Neither did he contemplate their futures and despair.

He looked up to heaven with a trembling heart and surrendered his cherished ones to God. Jesus asked because he loved.

May we do the same.

Wendy