

High St Uniting Church Frankston
John 17:1 -11

Making God known



For those who revere Jesus as a teacher and spiritual leader, it must feel a bit like his life was cruelly cut short. There was so much more he could have done in spreading the word of God. If it wasn't for Judas, he could have got through Passover and snuck out of Jerusalem to return to Galilee. And there must have been others who thought like that in the Early Church communities for John to capture Jesus words in this wonderful

overheard prayer to the Father, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." Not cut short, finished! And this is before the last words on the cross, "It is finished." And, rather startling to consider, the scruffy bunch of fishermen and outcasts walking around Galilee and Judea, sharing lunch with 'sinners' and offending the religious leaders, 'glorified' God! In our culture of respectable people gathering in grand churches for polished, ordered worship, this is radical stuff to consider!

It's comforting to think that what Jesus is referring to in this overheard prayer to God are the miracles - the healings and feedings and water into wine - the 'signs' that John talks about. The wonderful 'God stuff' that shows Jesus was more than a teacher and spiritual leader. But I don't think they are the 'glorified God' stuff that Jesus is talking about. It wasn't the grand miraculous stuff that kept the disciples – the ones Jesus is praying for – following Jesus from village to village. Here was a man who brought God close. The God of welcome, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. Sure, that welcome and mercy showed in some miraculous healings and feedings, but I think it meant even more to those men and women who were welcomed into sharing the grand mission of Jesus to make God known. They knew who they were and how much they were not 'God people' in terms of the Law, and yet, they experienced the gracious welcome of Jesus, and it was for them, glorious.

It may seem strange to hear Jesus say that his task is finished before the trial and crucifixion, but he already knew that his interactions with the religious leaders had made his death inevitable. We can have similar misgivings about hearing him say it is finished on the cross when we know the resurrection is yet to come. Those misgivings are because we know that the suffering, death, and resurrection are also a part of making God known. The God who takes on all the worst that the world can give, and do, and returns, not with vengeance, but with love. The same God that Jesus made known in grace and welcome and forgiveness and mercy and compassion.

John talks a lot about eternal life in his account of Jesus mission and ministry, and in this season of resurrection it's top of mind. And in this grand prayer that is before us today, Jesus describes his role as giving eternal life to his followers and then, if you read on, he asks that those followers may be with him in his eternal glory. Eternal life, life in heaven, and then, like a sharp intrusion that drags us back to reality, "This is eternal life, to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Scholars will tell us that this is an obvious addition to John's telling of the prayer - it switches to God in the third person and Jesus wouldn't refer to himself as Jesus Christ - but it's an important bucket of cold water over those thoughts of eternal life in the hereafter. Like the angel at the Ascension asking the disciples, "Why are you staring up to heaven?", we are thrown back to the mission – the finished mission of Jesus

to make God known. And in that light, this prayer opens to become much more than we usually see. Yes, it's about keeping the disciples safe and together. Yes, it's about declaring the unity of Jesus and the Father. Yes, it's about Jesus leaving the world and returning to the Father. But much more, it's about God protecting and resourcing the disciples to take up the task of making God known in the world. The prayer is Jesus' request to God to protect the disciples from the enemies of the message of God's grace. It's about inspiring and empowering the disciples to hold to the one task and the one message. The make God known; the God of welcome and forgiveness and mercy and compassion.

In Mark's Gospel we hear the start of Jesus preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near", and here is Jesus at the other end of his mission saying to God, "I have finished the task you gave me, to make you known." He finished his part of the task, the task that included training the disciples to carry on the task. And we are the 'now' of those disciples. We are the followers of Jesus who he is praying about to God. Not disciples looking to heaven to see the glory of Jesus, but disciples glorifying God in radical acts of welcome, mercy, and compassion, here and now.

This is our task, not to cajole people or scare them into being good enough for some future heaven, nor to introduce and worship the glorified, heavenly Jesus. Our task is to make God known to people, the God of grace and compassion, through acts of love in lives here and now. Through accepting and welcoming all; sharing and listening and helping. Through living in mercy and forgiveness and kindness. Through showing the world that God is not the remote, demanding divine figure, but the loving Father who Jesus introduced to so many people abandoned by religion. In our behaviour, in our words, and in our actions, we need to break the idea that God stands back and says, "You're not good enough." Jesus glorified God by entering people's lives and bringing grace, mercy, and compassion close, making God the Father known. And that is our task as followers of Jesus and inheritors of the mission of making our God of love known in our world, our culture and our time.