

'In the world but not of the world'

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Gospel Reading John 17: 6-19

One of the best things about having kids is reading kids books. My boys and I loved especially the books of Dr Seuss. Dr Seuss was passionate about helping kids learn to read, and he worked out with his publishers a list of about 250 words that every kid should know - he wrote books like *Cat in the Hat* only using those words. And then when he had got good at that, his publisher made a bet with him one day, as a joke – I bet you can't write a book using only 50 words! 50 words! I have used double that already and I have only been talking for half a minute. How could you fill a whole story book with just 50 words! Do you know which book that was?

Green eggs and ham. Do you like green eggs and ham? I do not like them, Sam-I-am.

Brilliant. I could recite it all word-for-word, and heaven help me if I skipped any lines or the boys would complain!

The Gospel of John is the theological version of Green eggs and ham. Not in the content, but in the process. It is constructed of actually a very small number of Greek words. It is written with amazingly simplicity.

My husband and I studied here in Dunedin. Of all the courses I did, the one I was most proud of personally was Greek. Mainly because it was the most difficult, and I got an A plus and I was enormously proud of that A plus, because I worked really hard for it. By the end of the year I could actually read the gospel John, in Greek – with a dictionary not too far away.

It contains the most complex theological ideas expressed in the simplest possible language.

And here in the thick of it, in Jesus' high priestly prayer in chapter 17, the language is densely layered, words repeated this way then that way – All mine are yours and yours are mine. They do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world. You sent me into the world, as I sent them into the world.

We don't get much John in the Lectionary, so it is good to focus on John every now and then – after Easter we get a little 3-week block of John - to appreciate its brilliance, this extraordinary intricate writing built with basic children's building blocks.

I want to talk this morning about one of those building blocks. And it is a very important one, and not an easy one, because this one word means different things in John – and that word is 'world'. In Greek, *Kosmos*, with a K. We have an English word, *Cosmos*, which means the universe, all of the created tangible reality from galaxies to atoms.

Unfortunately this is not what John means when he uses the Greek word 'Kosmos'. Or maybe sometimes he does and sometimes he doesn't. It is really difficult to tell.

In our Bibles this word is translated 'world', in every English translation of the bible. But what is the world?

When you read "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.", what do you think the word 'world' refers to?

Does it mean "they do not belong to planet earth, just as I do not belong to planet earth"?

or maybe it means "they do not belong to human society, just as I do not belong to human society"?

Does it mean "they do not belong to the universe, just as I do not belong to the universe"?

Does it mean "they do not belong to this wicked godless society, just as I do not belong to this wicked godless society"?

Could it mean “they do not belong to the Roman empire, just as I do not belong to the Roman empire”?

Each of these vastly different meanings could be an accurate translation of the word ‘Kosmos’ in John’s gospel. Instead we get only one word, ‘world’.

As you are starting to hear, how we understand this word has vast implications for the relationship between Christ and the earth

between Christ and culture,

and, so, between Christ-disciples and the earth, and Christ-disciples and the cultures we live in.

Do we ‘belong’ to the world?

So what can we say for certain?

In John’s simple building-blocks use of words, what are the relationships? Let’s map it out:

1. We are ‘in’ the world. So the ‘world’ is what surrounds us. Out context.
2. God gives people to Jesus “out of” the world
3. The ‘world’ can be a hostile place. In our reading today Jesus describes his followers as needing “guarding” and “protection” from the world which “hates” both him and them.
4. Christ, and his disciples with him, do not belong to the world but have an alternative identity, and
5. Jesus sends his followers “into” the world, as God sent Jesus into the world – remember the very beginning of John, the word coming into the world, light into darkness.

So these tiny marker words – in, out, from, to, into – define the relationships. Pay attention to the smallest words. These are exact translations from John’s Greek. These we can be confident of.

I am these days working mainly in the area of sustainability. I am part of A Rocha, locally, nationally and now internationally which is fun, so long as they don’t have zoom calls in the middle of the night! I am immersed in eco theology and eco church. Central to these discussions is the relationship between humanity and creation, people and earth. From a Christian faith perspective this relationship is founded on the relationship between God and creation, Christ and the earth. So this little word, ‘Kosmos’ in John’s Gospel is huge.

And we grieve and we struggle because in John the relationship between Christ and the Kosmos is a conflicted one. Our reading today refers to the Evil one. In John’s world view the world, the kosmos is under an evil authority, which Christ protects us from so that we are not ‘lost’ to this evil. Where Christians have applied this meaning to the natural world, this has built a world view that the natural environment is a hostile place where we are not at home. If the planet is under evil authority, hostile to people of faith, then we are justified in taking and using and exploiting it. The earth does not matter for we do not belong to it, this is not our home.

It deeply grieves me that many Christians today have that attitude. This is one of the biggest barriers to mission and evangelism in our time, and, sadly, a contributing factor to the terrible state that our planet is now in.

Eco theology rejects this reading of scripture. And to do that we have to read John’s gospel rightly. When Jesus states, in John, that we do not belong to the world, he does not mean planet earth. He means human culture, the unjust political and economic systems, that are just as much a feature of our ‘world’ now as they were in his time.

To read scripture rightly we have to bring our own selves into the conversation, our own relationships. So can I ask you, just for what you know to be true for yourself, what is your relationship with this world of ours? do you feel a sense of belonging to the natural environment, to the planet? Do you relate to particular places and not others? Do you belong here?

My own answer to this question, which I hope is also an accurate reading of the Gospel of John, is that there are two realities. God created the heavens and the earth. Heaven and earth, spiritual and tangible dimensions. I am in both. I belong on earth, connected deep through my skin and bone and breath to the rocks and air and whanau creatures. And I belong in God, hidden with Christ. And in Christ I believe and I hope and I trust that one day the heavens and the earth will be made one, and all will be made new, in the eternal reality that our creed calls the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, of which the resurrection of Jesus was the sign post, the first fruit, the promise of what is to come.

BUT this hope does not cut me off from this world in the here and now. Christ does not call us out of the world but into the world.

This is what I mean when I say that we as people of faith are in the world but not of the world. We are here and there, then and now, both at the same time.

And so we care for our local communities and our rivers and dolphins, with care about global warming and we work to protect this world from the real and present dangers that it faces. The natural world under threat from the human world, and this is the place we find ourselves as people of faith.

What matters most of all to me is how God feels about it all, because that is where I belong, inside the heart of God. And I know, for the Bible tells me so, that God loves the world – the created universe only exists because God loves it, and the broken human world is also so close to God's heart.

John 3:16 – For God so loved the world, the kosmos, that he sent his only son ...

For God so loved the world

This is our faith and our mission, this is our testimony and our eternal life. Amen.