

## Sermon 21/05/23 John 17:1-11

### Jesus is going away

'Christopher Robin was going away. Nobody knew why he was going: nobody knew where he was going; indeed, nobody even knew why he knew that Christopher Robin was going away. But somehow or other everybody in the Forest felt that it was happening at last'.

Yes. I do realise that there is no exact parallel with Jesus' ascension and the end of The House at Pooh Corner because Jesus told the disciples several times that he would not always be with them. They should have known that he was going although several times in the gospel's we are left with the distinct impression that they were not believing what they were being told. But it seems that they did not really understand why after the resurrection he needed to go again, and where he was going.

Before that however we have this pivotal moment recorded in John's gospel. This takes place immediately before Jesus leaves for Gethsemane, it marks the end of the beginning, or if you prefer the beginning of the end. I could describe it as the end of his public ministry except that there is nothing at all public about this Jesus is in the upper room with the disciples at the end of that surreal Passover meal where he has spoken at length about so much.

Suddenly it becomes intimate, the disciples appear to be onlookers as Jesus addresses his Father directly. Apologies to anyone who found that reading hard to keep track of. It is hard to keep track of. I had to make notes in order to make any sense of it. The words are both repetitive and heavily nuanced to cover all the angles. He prays for himself, for his relationship with God. He asks that as he has accomplished all that was asked of him, he may now return to the glory he had before the world began. Then he prays for the disciples, that they too may be glorified, may have eternal life. The prayer is very specific. It is not for the world in general: it is for those of the world given to Jesus.

Like those first disciples we have been allowed to listen in on this intimate moment. But why did the evangelist think it was so important that it needed to be included in the gospel?

It could be about the timing. Jesus knew that he was about to be arrested and that the next few days would lead to his death. He prays for his friends. Even the prayer for himself leads into a prayer for them. Their glory and access to eternal life, depend upon his sharing glory with the Father. During the meal he has issued the instruction to 'love one another as I have loved you', he has given them the format of the communion service, a means by which to remember him. It is a bit like passing a relay baton, and it is worth remembering that at the time the gospel was written the writer probably did not expect that we would wait over 2000 years for Christ to return. The relay has lasted much longer than expected.

Or do we need to eavesdrop so that we understand. We understand our importance to Jesus. He prays not just for the original disciples but for all who the Father gives to him – he prays for us. For us to also fulfil what was asked of us, and that we too may have eternal life.

By listening in we are party to that intimate relationship and shown that we too can have such a connection. It is alright to pray for ourselves and our friends. Our prayers can be repetitive or not too easy to follow because God can manage all of that, as long as it is built on faith.

'What a friend we have in Jesus', singing those words grates rather with me but not the concept. Surely this is what we are being encouraged to see here, that our relationship with God through Jesus can be akin to friendship. Is that at odds with the idea of glorification? – no because we are asked to glorify through fulfilling our tasks.

In our Bible art sessions this term we have been talking to the children about friendship and what it means to them and to us. You can see some of the postcards they have written to friends on the chapel gates in St James. There was an interesting moment when I told them that I was meeting someone with whom I had been friends for 50 years unimaginable when you are only seven. But their ideas have nearly all been based on support and mutual help. There were a couple of the cards that really hit home for me. The child who asked if it was ok for him to write his friend's name in Chinese characters because that is how he knows him, and also one of the children who chose to write to a friend in Australia who she had not seen for several years. For both of them friendship did not depend on seeing each other but on thinking of each other.

Which takes us back to the Ascension. Jesus had climbed a hill with his disciples, they spoke about the future, how things would change but they would be befriended by the Holy Spirit to support them. The disciples stood looking up to where Jesus had been taken in a cloud. They were not sure what to do. It was the angels who encouraged them that this was not the way forward. They returned to Jerusalem and 'devoted themselves to prayer'.

The end of the House at Pooh Corner also takes place on a hill top, an enchanted place, where Christopher Robin tells Pooh about things he doesn't really understand. The final words are, 'a little boy and his bear will always be playing'. That relationship will continue, just as our relationships with God through Jesus will continue for generations, until Jesus returns as promised by the angels to the first disciples.