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## Introduction

This is the seventh Sunday after Easter we are back again in the words Jesus spoke to his disciples at the last supper. This is, without a doubt, the longest dinner speech of the Christian scriptures, and the words shared by Jesus can sometimes seem like a transcription of free association from someone who loved his friends, was facing death, had a vision of God that he was desperate to share, and was trying to impart wisdom that would be nurturing after the inevitable conflict that was about to come.

All that goes to say, if you were speaking to your friends at a time when you knew there was certain persecution about to come on you, what would you say?

It's a serious question, serious because of the anxiety being put upon Jesus during this time. The tension in Jerusalem towards him was building, he knew that even by coming to that city he was shortening his life — so did his friends: *Lord, let us go with you so that we can die alongside you* Thomas had said when Jesus set off to heal Lazarus — and in the midst of that rising worry, Jesus speaks words that we still reckon with.

So, by way of preparation for words from a man speaking about love to his friends while he's about to face torture and execution, imagine yourself in a situation where, even in the face of such persecution, you wish to speak about what really matters to your friends.

And let us enter the prayer of Jesus.

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## Text

John 17:6–19

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I

came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

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## Comment

While it's clear that this text was assembled many decades after the death of Jesus, I do find myself sometimes putting myself as an observer in the room where this was happening. I wonder what the mood was like. I'm guessing some of the disciples were curious, some were fit for a fight with the Romans, some were expectant of a big show-down, and others were wondering if they should have come. There would — as with any group of people — be the usual tensions between them.

And then we come to Jesus of Nazareth. What would he have been feeling? Who knows what he actually expected to happen. It seems clear he understood that he was going to suffer, but did he know it would be that night? Was he wondering about escaping?

What I find so remarkable is that in the midst of this pressure coming down towards him, Jesus had a message to communicate. Facing empire and empire's executions, he wished his disciples to have a memory of him speaking of something that empires cannot control: the capacity to love, the capacity to love and pursue truth, the recognition of loving friendships, the knowledge that your friend and teacher wishes you to know you've been loved and protected, even while protection is about to be shown its limits.

The text for this week is wordy — Jesus says something and then goes into a clause, and a subclause, and then something that is following up making a theological point about the subclause he'd made, then he returns to the prayer, and then he makes another point and then goes back to the prayer. But, if I were to dare to edit Jesus' prayer down (I know, I know, extra years in purgatory await me) I would see it as the following:

*I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world...*

*I am asking on their behalf*

*Holy Father, protect them...so that they may be one, as we are one.*

*While I was with them, I protected them ...I guarded them...But now I am coming to you,*

*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.*

*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.  
As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.  
And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

In short it is: I love you, we are friends. I have done everything I can to protect you. But I am going now. But that which has protected me also protects you. Be made holy by truth. Go into the world — a world that may misunderstand or even reject you — with truth. I came with truth. You can too.

What is this truth that Jesus is so insistent on imparting? It has been a theme throughout the gospel. Jesus arrives full of grace and truth (1:14). For Jesus, truth is about doing, rather than abstract concepts: “But those who do what is true come to the light” (3:21). Speaking to a Samaritan woman he speaks of worshipping in spirit and truth (4:23), and the truth will set you free too (8:32). What is the truth? Jesus says that he is the truth (14:6). And, at Jesus’ trial, Pilate asks his famous words: What is truth?

John’s gospel’s assertion is that truth isn’t a *what*, it’s a *who*. In this text, Jesus of Nazareth is the embodiment of God. And what does this embodiment of God do? Goes to weddings. Saves a host from embarrassment. Speaks to people who are isolated from their communities. Exposes hypocrisy in communities who wish to burden the already burdened. Is not controlled by foreign princes or soldiers, but also has more important things to say and do than get into fights with them. Wishes places of prayer to be places of prayer, not markets. Takes off his clothes in front of his friends and washes their feet. Tells his friends he loves them. Visits other friends when they’re in grief. Engages in long dialogues with people who come to him in secret.

This imagination of truth from the heart of John’s gospel is profoundly rooted in an incarnational presence among people: a *hereness* in a particular time.

Again, it is worthwhile coming back to the setting. These words are being put in the mouth of a Galilean who was about to face trial, abandonment, crisis and torture. So in light of that, the prayer he prayed was one that showed his deep priorities: be nurtured and turned towards and supported by the truth. This is not an abstract concept, it is a way to live, a way of being gathered into a spirituality of action in the midst of conflicts that will exhaust you. These are powerful words, and ones to live by, especially when we face conflicts that cause us justifiable outrage. Jesus is not naive to these conflicts, but asked his followers to understand something deeper than the conflict, to find rest in the underlying truths.

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## Response

Many of us live in circumstances where there are unjustifiable powers impeding our lives, or choices, or freedoms.

This text offers a profound invitation: to dig deep into the truth that will sustain. In facing obstacles, the invitation is not to declare war on the obstacle, but to be grounded in the truth that might expose and undermine the roots of the lie that stands against you.

This is no easy spirituality. It does not ask us to look away in denial. It also does not ask us to centre the wrong. It invites us to be rooted in the truth, and from *this* rootedness, to hold vision. This is a spirituality that asks those of us in difficult

circumstances to look at what opposes us and consider the foundation that supports us. This — in action, belief, stance, risk, curiosity and love — is what Jesus calls the truth. And it is for this sense of truth that he prayed.

For a response, we pose an audacious question to you: what kind of loving truth can hold you through the things that burden you?

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## Prayer

Jesus,

here's something true:  
sometimes it is difficult  
to follow you.

You do not offer easy  
answers. Instead you open  
your robe and your heart,  
serve your friends, and  
defy empires that wish to force  
you into wars of their own  
creation.

Help us find enough quiet  
to deepen that kind of truth  
in us, so that we can open up  
to love, and stand upon truths  
that will sustain us.

This sustained you, and — we hope —  
it will sustain us too.

Amen.