



JESUS PRAYS *for* ALL DISCIPLES

KATHLEEN RUSHTON discusses how John 17:6-19 can challenge and support our commitment to justice in the world.

Contexts of John 17:6-19

First, we place the prayer of Jesus for disciples (John 17:6-19) within the context of the Gospel. At the last supper (Jn 13:1-30) Jesus gives a farewell discourse (Jn 13:31 - 16:33) which leads into prayer. He prays for himself (Jn 17:1-5), for disciples (Jn 17:6-19) and for future believers (Jn 17:20-26).

A second context is literary. A first-century people would recognise that the prayer was part of a formal farewell address. A well-known person approaching death, like Jesus, expressed concern for the well-being of followers, gave a review of their life and asserted that their relationships were to continue. The address included helpful information about what was to happen and predictions about hard times ahead. The speaker would pray for those they were leaving.

A third context is historical. The Roman Empire was built on slavery

— about one slave to every five free adults. In Rome, the ratio was higher, one to three. Because Jesus's words and actions critiqued that status quo, he endured death by crucifixion, a brutal form of execution reserved for slaves and non-Roman citizens. It included torture and sexual abuse. John's gospel probably came from Ephesus which, because of its slave market, was the "hub" of Roman slavery.

In the Gospel Jesus is imaged as the master (*kyrios*) who washed the feet of his slaves (*douloi*, Jn 13:4-6) whom he called his friends (Jn 15:14-15). "During supper Jesus ... got up from table." Assuming the role of a slave he "took off his outer robe", wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples' feet. Nowhere else in ancient literature does a master behave like this. So Jesus's actions interrupted the existing order. And those actions would have challenged future believers, those in the Christian community who owned slaves.

Modern Slavery

Slavery is not a thing of the past. There are approximately 40 million people enslaved worldwide, an estimated 3,000 in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Two-thirds of all people in modern slavery live in Asia Pacific — the area ANZ trades with extensively. Our country does not have accountability legislation in place, such as Britain's Modern Slavery Act (2015) or Australia's Modern Slavery Act (2018), that addresses the transparency of exploitation and slavery in the supply chains of our imports. ANZ companies could unknowingly be importing goods and services made by people who are exploited and enslaved. We are implicated in a consumerist lifestyle which drives slavery. Every time we purchase a product there is a chain reaction.

John's prayer of Jesus can challenge us to become aware of slavery, and to eradicate it.

Prayer for Disciples Today

Jesus prays in John. He does not talk about prayer or teach his disciples to pray. He prays for his disciples whom God gave him and not for "the world" (Jn 17:9). We need to distinguish between the three ways the world is used in John. The first is the natural universe that God loves and where the revelation of God unfolds in creation and in history. The second suggests a creation that is able to respond — to recognise or not recognise God as creator. And the third is the choice we make

Kathleen Rushton RSM is author of *The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor: Hearing Justice in John's Gospel* (SCM Press 2020).



about how we live — to be for God or against God, to be for the Evil One or against the Evil One.

Jesus does not request that disciples be taken out of the world (Jn 17:15). We as Church, therefore, are to be in the world but not to compromise with or to escape from it. Slavery is the result of the moral choices of individuals and groups entrenched in political, economic, social, cultural and religious structures which construct a world that is the polar opposite of the works of God. The “world” with which we are concerned, according to Sandra Schneiders, is the good world to which God missions us, the evil world which we confront (slavery and exploitation), and the alternative world we are called into with Jesus in the ongoing creation of finishing the works of God.

Following the departure of Jesus the disciples are in a new situation, so keeping them together is crucial. Jesus’s prayer asks to “protect” them (Jn 17:11, 12, 15) evoking Jesus as the Good Shepherd — to keep the disciples united and free from attack.

Jesus also asks God to “sanctify [consecrate]” the disciples “in the truth” (Jn 17:17–19). Sanctifying evokes being set apart for sacred works (Ex 28:41) as Jesus is set apart and sent to finish the works of God. Jesus celebrates in prayer that “for their sakes I sanctify [consecrate] myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth”. Truth, a key word in John, means “faithfulness” or “loyalty”. It means to be faithful to obligations and commitments. Truth is illustrated by God’s faithful, saving action. And we are to remain in our world bearing witness to the truth.

Alan Culpepper says John 17:6–19 is a summary of three aspects of the believing community’s reflection. Jesus’s identity and work (often called Christology), the nature of the believing community (often called ecclesiology) and the mission of the Church in the world (often called missiology) are unified in the death-resurrection of Jesus. As the Christian community participating in mission today we continue to be transformed in faith to act on our “consecration in truth”.

Christian Community Resists Modern Slavery

One area of truth is to identify and act to abolish slavery. We can support actions already in the pipeline such as the government’s Plan of Action against Forced Labour, People Trafficking and Slavery 2020-2025.

We can support the *Sign for Freedom* campaign. This is the initiative of Trade Aid and World Vision together with 80 local businesses. They hope to present to the government a petition with at least 500,000 signatures requesting comprehensive legislation that addresses modern slavery, forced labour, human trafficking and worker exploitation in our country.

We can act locally by buying fair trade goods. And we can befriend migrant workers, a group who are particularly at risk of exploitation. It is notable that the first human slavery conviction in this country came about because a woman noticed that another woman at church was upset, and listened to her story. And we can read about the links between slavery and the degradation of Earth in books such as Kevin Bales’s *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*.

Jesus’s prayer in John is not for the world but rather for us in the world to be protected and sanctified in truth as we participate in the works of God.

As a Christian community, we need to confront modern human slavery and worker exploitation in our world — and eradicate it. 🗑️

Painting: *Hiding in Plain Sight* by Sara Shamma
© Used with permission www.sarashamma.art
“Sara Shamma: Modern Slavery” exhibition curated by Kathleen Soriano, London 2019; Chester Cathedral 2020.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Plan of Action: www.mbie.govt.nz/have-your-say/plan-of-action-against-forced-labo2ur-people-trafficking-and-slavery/

SIGN FOR FREEDOM petition before 17 May: www.signforfreedom.nz

16 May: 7th Sunday of Easter
RL John 17:11b-19;
RCL John 17:6-19

Beyond These Shores: Aotearoa and the World

Edited by Nina Hall
Published by Bridget Williams Books, 2020
Reviewed by Susan Smith

Beyond these shores is moana, that vast ocean which has brought and continues to bring so many people to Aotearoa. What has the arrival of these people meant for us, and what does it suggest for our future? Eight essays including a wonderfully comprehensive Introduction by editor Nina Hall, offer alternative possibilities to those unvaryingly provided by politicians, senior government officials and prominent entrepreneurs. How can the often-unacknowledged voices of Māori, of Pasifika people, of the politically and economically disenfranchised and of the whenua and moana, inform decision-making around Aotearoa’s relationship with the wider world?

Some of the authors are members of New Zealand Alternative, which wants New Zealand to opt for a more progressive foreign policy that is less involved with its Five Eyes intelligence partners and more involved with Scandinavian countries. Other suggestions include seeing our Pasifika neighbours as equals rather than as possibly errant children. Some critique Aotearoa’s peace-keeping operations abroad as being focused on helping the host government build up its defence and police capabilities. More than one author asks when will we see our present government implementing truly transformational policies at home and abroad. Currently Jacinda Ardern has immense goodwill. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if she could build on this so that her government could transform our relationships with the international community? 🗑️

