

**John 17.3: knowing the one true God:  
Trinity, faith, evangelism, gnostics, dementia...**  
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Among the many instructions given by God to Moses in the Old Testament, we read in Leviticus chapter 16 about the Day of Atonement. In this chapter Aaron, the priestly brother of Moses, is commanded to sacrifice animals in order to put things right with God. Aaron is told to do this in a specific order, a widening circle, initially praying for himself, then for the religious officers - the priests and Levites, and finally for the whole people of God.

The structure and activity described in Leviticus 16 would seem to be part of the background to the words of Jesus we just heard from John chapter 17. The context is Maundy Thursday. Jesus is speaking on the night before his own atoning sacrifice. He, like Aaron, prays for an ever-widening circle, beginning with his own relationship with the Father, reaching out towards his disciples, and finally extending to the Church in every age.

- Firstly, Jesus looks to the coming days: 'Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had before the world was made.' He is thinking of his ascension, that great festival which Christians celebrated last Thursday.
- And then, in verse 6, Jesus proceeds to pray for the disciples: 'I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me.'
- Finally, beyond the extract we just heard, beginning at verse 20, Jesus prays for the whole Church: 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.' After his return to heaven, Jesus will unite his followers through the Spirit, whose fresh inspiration of Pentecost we will celebrate next Sunday.

The structure of John 17 points to the fact that it's a one-off, a completely unique chapter in the New Testament.

- It is special because the whole chapter is a prayer, the only long prayer in all 4 gospels. It is sometimes referred to as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, a self-consecration, self-offering, made on the night before his death for the sins of the world.
- But John 17 is more than a prayer of self-offering. The tenses in the chapter are all muddled up. Jesus speaks as if he has *already* been killed – and risen – and even as if he has already ascended! We're seeing here the distillation of a theme which runs throughout John's gospel that the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost are not four separate events but a single upwards movement. The lifting of the Son of Man on the cross is not a moment of shame but of exaltation, paradoxically part of that same glory which Jesus had with the Father before creation and to which he returns at the end of his earthly ministry. As we heard from verse 11, spoken (as I said) on the night *before* Jesus' death, '[Father], **now** I am no longer in the world, but [my disciples] are in the world, and I am coming to you.'

This majesty and mystery of John 17 goes some way to explaining why the chapter has seen more than its fair share of controversies. In particular, I want to drill down on verse three because this has proved a particularly problematic sentence through the Christian centuries. John 17.3 reads "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

The first problem with this verse is theological. Some have read it as challenging the Trinity, the core Christian notion that within the one God there are three persons, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Anti-trinitarians in the C17th read John 17.3 as an assertion that the Father is the 'only true God' that he is distinct from Jesus Christ whom he sent, and that therefore Jesus cannot be divine. Such was the perceived threat of this anti-Trinitarianism that John Wallis, an Oxford mathematician and clergyman, devoted three one-hour sermons on this single verse to establishing an orthodox rebuttal. Wallis' core message is that John 17.3 does not exclude the divinity of the Son and Spirit, and that Unitarians pervert the order of the sentence. As he says, the verse does not read, "that the *Father only* is True God; but that the Father is *the only true God*":<sup>1</sup> there is room in the gospel ordering, Wallis concluded, for the Son and Spirit also to be the only true God. Wallis was clear that John 17.3 excludes a plurality of Gods, but does not exclude a plurality of persons in the same God.

Let's shift our attention away from the Trinity and onto a second problem found in John 17.3. This second problem is about salvation. To say that eternal life is to *know* the only true God risks conflating redemption with religious knowledge. John 17.3 was much loved by the early Church heretics called 'gnostics'. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, gnostics argued that God left an intellectual spark in his elect and that salvation was about liberating this spark from bodily imprisonment so that it could return to the eternal Light from which it came. It is not hard to see from our controverted verse why some biblical scholars have pondered whether John's gospel might have been written by a gnostic: '*this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*'

Christians have always rejected the gnostic idea of salvation by intellect. The early Church grew out of Judaism and therefore shared the positive Jewish outlook on material things. Throughout the Hebrews Scriptures, our Old Testament, we read that God makes the world and loves the world: material things have value in God's eyes. Ultimately, God in Jesus took on a material body with the intention of saving humans in their fullness - mind *and* body. The gnostic idea that only our brains are worth redeeming ignores the value and love which God has for all aspects of his creation. The author of John's gospel knew this well; he was not a gnostic.

Let's leave the gnostics in the second century, jump into our theological Tardis, and head for the Protestant Reformation. For here we encounter a variation on the error of salvation by knowledge. That's because there is a slippery slope from the central Protestant dogma of salvation by faith and a misconception that faith is an intellectual exercise. The major reformers were clear that saving faith is not just a movement of the intellect. It also requires the will. Yes, people need to know the gospel and, yes, the mind needs to assent to the truth of this knowledge. But both these processes are nothing unless we also make a response of the *will*, an act of *fiducia*, trust. If we don't say yes to God in our hearts as well as our heads, our faith is empty.

This realisation that faith requires trust, a movement of the heart, has implications for how we do evangelism. People don't come to faith when the Bible is bashed over their heads – although some evangelicals still haven't twigged this. Conversion is not just about cognition. Here at St Michael's we have a more nuanced and holistic approach to evangelism.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis, *Three sermons* (1691), 19.

Evangelism happens when we (that's you as well as me!) invite and encourage participation in a worshipping community that is attractive, affirming and life-shaping.

Considering the relationship between faith and knowledge has implications for a third and distinctively modern challenge. What does eternal life which is to *know the one true God* say about those with failing mental faculties? As medical advances extend our lifespan, many find their minds wearing out before their bodies. Dementia is a dreadful condition. As theologian and commentator Angela Tilby wrote recently, people with dementia 'fade away' before they die, often experiencing severe confusion and distress.<sup>2</sup>

It would be a dangerous temptation to mis-read John 17.3 as an excuse for undervaluing, mistreating, or even terminating those whose mental capacities are failing. If it is eternal life to *know the only true God*, what's the point of hanging around when we have little recognition of our family and surroundings?

Christianity stands as a beacon against such zero-sum individualism. We believe that humans are made in the image of God - but you and I do not bear God's image in isolation. To be human is to interact with others in the image of God. A person is shaped by society such that the personality of someone with dementia can be held by the memories and shared history of the whole community. Belonging comes before awareness. Again as Angela Tilby puts it, 'the Christian journey is not... a flight from the alone to the alone. It is a pilgrimage in company in which we learn to share each other's burdens.'<sup>3</sup>

Finally, I want to draw all of this together in the light of the dreadful events in Manchester. True faith poses a comprehensive challenge to those who would harness narrow claims to '*know the one true God*' as a justification for terrorist activity.

It is eternal life to know God and Jesus Christ. This process is a movement of the *everything* which is me in partnership with the *everything* of those around me. Together we move towards the Supreme Everything whom we will celebrate in two weeks' time on Trinity Sunday, as the inherently relational yet singular God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit - to whom is due all praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Church Times* 19.5.17, page 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*