So what does it mean, we are in the world, but not of the world? It gets tricky, because just as in English, in Greek the same word, like ‘cosmos’, can mean a variety of different things. One challenge in John’s Gospel is that the word ‘world’, ‘cosmos’ in Greek, is used about 10 different ways. And he uses the word a lot. 78 times altogether, and 9 times just in this short passage.

At times John uses the word ‘cosmos’, ‘world’ in a neutral way, as in everything created by God. But often, as in our Gospel today, it is not so neutral. When Jesus says we do not belong to the world, he doesn’t mean the world of the Garden of Eden, creation as God first gave it to us, ‘and it was good.’ He means the world after the fall. After we have grabbed the forbidden fruit. A broken, a fallen, ‘lost’ world. Even more specifically, when John uses the word ‘world’ this way, he means all the people, values and forces in this world that are in opposition to God, and to his Son, Jesus. Creation isn’t the problem, sin is, rebellion is.

At the time John was written, there were multiple cultures, value systems, ways of understanding and living life, conflicting worlds in tension. There was the Greek world, with its philosophy, Gods, gymnasia, etc. The Roman world, with its imperial system, slavery, Roman legions, even emperor worship. There was Jewish world, with its Torah, worship of one God, Kosher laws. Even within the Jewish world, there were Jews who were deeply influenced by Greek ways of thinking and living, and those who rejected Greek influence. Then throw into the mix Jewish and Gentile Christians forging a new way becoming a community, and seeing the world in light of Jesus Christ. A new world where the power of sin was broken, defeated.

So in a way, through Jesus, John was telling his community that while they lived in those various first group of worlds, they didn’t belong to them. They belong to the new creation, established by Jesus through his teaching, his ministry, and his death and resurrection.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

We certainly have a variety of worlds competing with one another today. Even without throwing ISIS into the picture, there is a Hollywood world and value system, a wall street value system. The world of politics: Albany or Washington. There is the world of people just trying to be good, to make a living, to care for their family. You can name the various competing value systems as well as I can. And then there are those ready to follow Jesus and be disciples.

Is there still a place for saying things like we are in the world, but don’t belong to this world? Absolutely! This is as real an issue now as it was for Christians in John’s day.

When either Deacon Dave or I anoint children who are to be baptized, here is the prayer we use. Listen closely. See how it ties with the Gospel today.

Almighty God, you sent your only Son into the world to rescue us from the slavery of sin, and to give us the freedom only your sons and daughters enjoy. We pray for this child, who will have to face the world and all its temptations, and fight the devil in all his cunning. Your Son died and rose again to save us. By his victory over sin and death, Bring this child out of the
power of darkness, strengthen him/her with the grace of Christ, and watch over him or her at every step of life’s journey. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

I love that prayer. It is so real. Isn’t that exactly what every parent, grandparent, godparent what for their child?

So what about the evil one Jesus protects us from? Throughout history, writers have written about individuals on a journey, and used fantastic images to point out how easy it is to get off track. For the Greeks, there were the sirens, luring unsuspecting sailors on to the rocks, of the track, shipwrecked, away from the virtues their culture esteemed. The Lord of the Rings is a Christian fantasy about the battle between good and evil, about making the journey and avoiding the dangers, temptations along the way.

With parables, with teaching, through prayer, Jesus shows us the path, leads us through a fallen world to a life of grace. Even when we fall, he is ready to lift us up, tend our wounds, and put us back on the path.

Next week we will celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the guide who alerts us to temptations, the vices, the 7 deadly sins, and strengthens us in the 7 virtues, the remedies to sin’s power.

We live in the world, in various worlds, where Pride, Greed, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy and Sloth are not only present as hidden traps, to pull us into darkness. Some of the worlds we may have to live in actually encourage those vices. But in the world of grace, the world of our faith, our prayer, the sacraments, the world the Holy Spirit guides us to, we have graces, virtues given by Christ to protect us, consecrate us, to keep us safe.

Humility can triumph over Pride
Charity, generosity, can counter Greed
Chastity, purity, cool the heat of Lust
Forgiveness calms the fire of Anger
Temperance, self-restraint are the antidote to Gluttony
Kindness, admiration lead us away from the trap of Envy
Diligence, zeal conquer Sloth.

Back to the Prayer of our Gospel today: Jesus consecrated himself by living the virtues, offering himself to the Father, passionately following his mission, a perfect offering.

He prays that we be able to do the same, and through the Holy Spirit, makes it possible.

It is an amazingly better world he leads us to, make no mistake about it! May we have the wisdom to follow where he leads, protected and consecrated, disciples headed for salvation and eternal joy. May we taste, and with God’s grace enter into fully the joy Jesus spoke of last week, again this week, the joy he ever holds out to us.