

Reflection for Sunday 29th May 2022 by Rev Steve Painting
John 17:20-26

Over the last few weeks our lectionary readings have included various excerpts from Jesus' conversation with his closest disciples at the last supper, recorded in chapters 13-16 of John's gospel. Moving on to chapter 17, John records the prayers Jesus makes before leaving to go to the Garden of Gethsemane where he is arrested and taken for trial. He begins by praying for himself and then goes on to pray for his immediate disciples gathered with him at that last Passover meal. We finally arrive at today's passage and Jesus' prayers for those who believe in him through the message given by those disciples. This then is Jesus' prayer for us, his church, the people who through the ages have heard the testimony of those who came before us and have chosen to put our faith and trust in Jesus.

From the content of Jesus' prayers in John 17, it is clear that they are the culmination of the conversation he has just had. That should not really be surprising. We often do the same in many of our church gatherings, perhaps most notably in housegroups. We have conversations about certain matters and then seek God's help and direction in those matters by committing them to prayer. Jesus' prayers echo then, the central messages of the conversation that preceded them (John 13-16). He is asking his Father for the spiritual empowerment to enable the teaching he has just given in the lives of his followers and those that come after them.

In the words of the prayer we are looking at today, the themes of his previous conversation come through quite clearly. His imperative to us to embrace the love of God in our lives, so prominent in Jesus' preceding conversation, surfaces again.

Likewise, the desire that he should be made known, and the glory of God (Father and Son) declared through the way his followers live. Yet none of that can happen without unity among those who believe in Jesus through the message of His apostles. Jesus' appeal to the Father that they may be one, is at the heart of this prayer. When we think about the history of the church and our own experiences of church, it is no wonder that Jesus prays to the Father for his help in in this area. Unity within the church seems a quite distant reality in many cases. It appears that in practice, it is a very difficult thing to achieve but it is also difficult to understand or define. Furthermore, the ways and means that people have used over the years to attain unity have not always been appropriate and in many cases harmful. So, is there anything in the content of Jesus' prayer that can help us?

We should first perhaps look at the wording Jesus uses. He repeatedly prays that his followers are to be as 'one'. It is hard to grasp what it means to be one. How can different people be a single entity? There is most definitely a mystery to this. When unity is fully realised, we sense it, but we perceive the mystery when we try to explain it. Oneness according to Jesus, is based on the model of His relationship with His Father. 'May they be one as we are one' is Jesus' prayer, and yet we struggle to understand how Jesus and the Father (and I would add here the Holy Spirit too) could be one God. To accept the reality of a trinitarian God, we have to embrace the element of mystery; of not being able to fully understand. Perhaps though Jesus does give a hint. In verse 21 he prays 'that all of them might be one, Father just as you are in me, and I am in you', and later in verse 22-23 'that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me'. Perhaps Jesus being 'in' us and him 'in' the Father is an

even harder thing to grasp but it is the uniting factor. I also suggest that it is through the Holy Spirit that it takes place. The Holy Spirit who alighted on Jesus at his baptism is the same Holy Spirit that resides within each of His' followers. Jesus returns to the Father to allow the Spirit to come, as indeed He did come on the believers at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God the Father and God the Son. The Spirit that is in each person of the Trinity will also be in each of Jesus' followers. Part of Christian unity is about allowing the Holy Spirit within, to mould our lives to the ways of the holy God and in order to do that our fallen spirits must yield to Him.

Wholeness and completeness are also words we should consider here. In using the word unity, we are already thinking about the relationship of different parts to form a whole or complete entity. Anything that lacks a part, integral to its being, is incomplete. The natural world itself is a very good example. It works on the basis that all its constituent parts contribute to the very being of the whole. When a habitat loses some of its native species, the loss of other dependant species soon follows. The habitat loses something of what it is supposed to be. It is no longer whole or entirely one. In the church unity, is about each person taking their place within the whole in order for the church itself to be an authentic entity. When certain people are, for various reasons, excluded by others the church ceases to be complete. It ceases to be fully one.

Paul's analogy of the human body in 1 Corinthians 12 helps us to understand what unity involves. The human body is a whole, being comprised of many parts all of which are integral to the well-being of the body as a whole. One part cannot be removed without it affecting the other parts. So it is with the church. For the sake of wholeness or to use the Hebrew term, 'Shalom' no

believer can be excluded. Interestingly, the verb to heal means to make whole. Healing is more than just a cure.

Unity is in many ways about acceptance, even when there is imperfection. It is not about enforcing everyone to adopt the same minutiae of doctrine or hold exactly the same beliefs about how certain religious practices and traditions are carried out. That is not unity. That borders on oppression. Unity is about accepting that another believer is somehow part of me and me part of them. They are to be valued and respected and not used or coerced.

It is significant that the world of today is characterised by fragmentation. We see divisive individualism, material inequality, prejudice and conflict. These are all features of an order devoid of the God of unity and wholeness. Jesus followers on the other hand, are called to be a sign of God's kingdom, an imperfect sign perhaps, but a sign nevertheless. Unity and wholeness are part of that sign. How though is it to be attained? Through the factor that Jesus has placed at the heart of His last supper conversation – love. He concludes his prayer 'I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.' When we learn to love as our heavenly Father loves, we will also grow in genuine unity.