

John 17: 1-11

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2017

I think I must have read this Gospel passage fifty times this week while preparing for this morning. I think that there is so much going on here that it can almost seem impenetrable, and I have certainly struggled with working out what Jesus is saying.

There is no denying just how important these words are. Like all of our Gospel readings for the past few weeks, they are part of Jesus' Farewell Discourses, which he delivered to his disciples on Maundy Thursday, just before his betrayal and arrest. These are the final words which Jesus would share with his closest friends before their separation, with the horror of Good Friday and then the joy of resurrection. In simplest terms, this is a kind of summing up of his ministry, his legacy and his relationship with his Father, and so it really is no wonder that it is complicated!

These words are at the end of the Farewell Discourses, and are a prayer – for Jesus himself, for his disciples and finally for all believers. This is often known as the High Priestly Prayer because Jesus takes the role of a priest, offering prayers for all, just as the High Priest would have done in the temple – just as we do when we pray in church on behalf of the people. Today we read the first 11 verses of the 26 verses of his entire prayer and there is a real intimacy here, as Jesus looks up to heaven and speaks to his Father.

It's significant that we read the Farewell Discourses at this time in the Easter Season because they deal with the "What next?" – the provision that God has put in place for all believers when Jesus has ascended. The first reading today from the first book of Acts reminds us that this promise is for the Holy Spirit. At the moment of Ascension, Jesus tells his friends that

"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you"

and in these prayers in John, Jesus is praying that his Father will send power through the Holy Spirit to all Christians. This is the power to continue Christ's ministry, as the disciples are told on the mountainside on the day of Ascension.

“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth”

This prepares us to think about the joy of Pentecost which we celebrate next weekend, when God sends his Holy Spirit in all his power, filling his disciples and filling us with all the fullness of his glory.

But back to Jesus’ prayer – he begins by praying for himself. For us, there is the sense of the inevitability of what Jesus is about to do. He says “the hour has come” and Jesus prays that the purpose of all that he is about to undergo, is to glorify God. In this prayer he accepts that his suffering is in order to grant all people eternal life, which is that infinitely high quality of life in living fellowship with God, both now and forever. He tells his Father that

“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do”

Again, emphasising that there was nothing self-centred about his ministry – everything was about his divine calling and his divine purpose. He finally asks that his Father will

“glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed”

And this exchange is exactly what begins in Christ’s resurrection and is finished at the moment of Ascension – Jesus is exalted to God’s right hand and his risen body is glorified – his humiliation becomes his exultation.

This is complicated, but it is awesome. Jesus’ earthly ministry accomplishes God’s purpose – all creation has the opportunity to live in relationship with him, for ever, and Jesus is victorious, glorified and reigning in Heaven.

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples tells us a lot about them. He is committing them, and their well-being into his Father’s care but his prayers also tell us how brave and faithful his closest friends were. They had been in a whirlwind, which was only going to get stronger and more confusing, but they had worked out who Jesus was. Jesus says of his disciples, that

“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”

The disciples, in spending their time with Jesus, could see the Father at work in him, and in doing so could have a proper understanding of the

nature of God. This is a massive step in faith, but from Jesus' prayer, we know that they received and accepted the teaching, unlike the Pharisees who heard the teaching but could not believe it. Jesus says that they

“know in truth that I came from you”

so they have worked out his divinity, and that this knowledge translated into strong and courageous faith.

Jesus is praying a heartfelt prayer for his close and loyal friends when he asks his Holy Father, who is both awesome and loving, to

“protect them in your name that you have given me”

And then we come to the sentence in this prayer which I believe is vital. Jesus says, Protect them Father

“so that they may be one, as we are one”

This is a prayer for unity and this is so important. Jesus prays that going forward in their ministry, when he is no longer physically with them, his disciples will be united, as he and his Father are united, inextricably, mysteriously and for ever.

He knows that they are all individuals, on their own faith journeys and will be engaged in their own ministries but he prays that they will be united in purpose and in motivation – their love for him.

This isn't a new idea for the disciples. The meaning that Jesus wants to convey in his prayer is not that they have to “become one” but rather that they “continually be one”. The disciples are already united, Jesus wants them to continue like this, stronger as one.

Jesus knew that he had to pray for unity, and the disciples' knew the same – the end of our first reading today describes the disciples, all named as individuals who, after the Ascension were

“constantly devoting themselves to prayer”

together with the women, and Jesus' Mother and brothers. There is no suggestion that they all agreed all the time, but the significance is that they all prayed together, united as a community in their faith.

Imagine a world where all believers are united – not homogenous and unthinking, but united despite their differences of opinion. We need to remember that the source of our unity is not in human structures such as the denomination we belong to, but in Jesus Christ. He gives us our

identity, and this unity gives us strength when we really need it. It's simple really, but there is no strength in division.

I read quite a lot of Christian news websites and articles. Some of you may do the same – Premier send a daily email with the day's headlines told from a Christian perspective. Sometimes this is helpful, sometimes it makes me utterly ashamed to be a Christian. The problem lies not with the articles themselves but with the comments beneath the articles, from people who profess to be Christians but who are absolutely keen to throw the first stone, using the language of judgement and damnation. This is not unity, and in fact is so far from what Jesus desired that his heart must be breaking at how far we've all come from what he intended.

It's easy for me to be judgemental about these things whilst conveniently forgetting how divisive I can be in my everyday life. We are all guilty of not being united, even though we know how wonderful the world could look, if we were. Unity needs to start in our own hearts, remembering that we are united in common belief, particularly about eternal life. Jesus died so that we can have the privilege of having a vibrant, growing relationship with our creator, here on this earth and forever after we die. God does not want us to be divided, but to be the best witnesses of his love that we can be, and all these things are there in the prayer that Jesus prayed. God is glorified by our actions and the best way to do that is together, with the Holy Spirit as our advocate and guide.

When we come together as one body, our prayers and our actions are a very potent force to be reckoned with. We pray, God hears us and in return he touches and shapes us and through his gifts, we can touch and shape the world. Christians, working and praying together, have done some incredible things, and changed the world in so many ways.

Locally, we have the fantastic example of the Merton Winter Night Shelter and the work of Faith in Action, and just this morning I read an article on the BBC News website about a Christian Community who have been praying on a train everyday, morning and evening for 20 years. This is an amazing witness to the community. Their pastor is quoted as saying

“When people pray together they become brothers and sisters. There isn't that separation of different tribes. They love one another.”

This is vital in a country like Kenya where there is sharp ethnic and tribal separation and this is so encouraging to hear.

Unity can only be a good thing. This week, in the wake of the atrocities in Manchester and in Egypt, and in the hundreds of other places which the media does not highlight, we need to remember that the best response to fear and terror is to be united in love. Christians should be leading the way in showing that hatred and division is wrong, and that the battle is won and love is victorious. We live in a broken and divided world, and I hope and pray that unity conquers all.

I met the new Bishop of Woolwich a few weeks ago, Bishop Karowei, and he said something that has really stuck with me. He doesn't agree when people say that we are all equal in God's sight. He says that it is far more complex than that – that God sees us all as individuals, he knows us by name, knows everything about us and he loves us regardless of all the bits we wish he couldn't see. He loves us despite our sins and our wrongdoing, he loves us even when we forget to love him, and he loves us even when we can't love ourselves.

And all Christians are united in this – we can never earn God's love, but Jesus earned it for us and we are united in his grace and his glory. We should love one another because he first loved us, and this is what we all have in common.

Pentecost is a festival about unity – the Holy Spirit joining what sin had divided – and so it seems fitting that we should think this week about how we are united in Christ's love. It's a challenge about how we should live, about how we should relate to one another and to God, and we should remember that we are never alone in this challenge. God's Holy Spirit, as Jesus prayed for us, strengthens, protects and guides us and we need to be thankful for his love.