

Address by Bill Pattinson for 29th May 2022

“So that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me.” So Jesus prays, looking up to heaven and in front of his disciples, because Jesus is praying for his disciples, both those present at the time and those to come - you and me. Sounds like a riddle - a play on pronouns and the verb “to be”. John’s gospel, so distinctly different from the other three, is full of imagery, metaphor and poetry. On one level it is easily understood; on another it challenges the greatest of theological minds; simple, yet complex. As in a piece of stimulating music not a note, not a word, is to be missed. Richard Burridge in his book, “Four Gospels, one Jesus?” wrote:

“If the other gospels are like symphonies or operas, John is like a great conductor, totally absorbed in his music and straining to ensure that every theme is heard by his audience.”

So which theme do we hear in this morning’s gospel Reading? I believe there are, in fact, two themes in which we can become totally absorbed - the themes of prayer and of unity. Let’s begin with prayer.

All 25 verses of John’s 17th chapter are the words Jesus prays on the night before his arrest and subsequent crucifixion. It is known as the “Farewell Prayer” or the “High Priestly prayer.” Jesus prays many times in the gospel, but this is by far the longest. If we are to be like Jesus, if he is to be in us and we in him, then we must pray. Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians says, “pray without ceasing. “This is a prayer for love prior to the greatest act of love as seen in the crucifixion, part of Jesus’last will and testament you might say. Prayer is radical. Karl Barth said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

This prayer is also about relationships, those Jesus has with his disciples and those he has with all who does his work, that is the Church to come. Even on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus is not so much concerned with himself, but with those he loved. As he gives way to God’s glory, he hands over his disciples to God’s protection: “Holy Father”, he prays, “protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Even though his disciples are about to betray him, deny him and abandon him, he wants them to find comfort and peace, knowing that each of their worlds is about to be torn apart. And so we pray for those we love, despite what heartache that might bring. And we pray for those whose world has been torn apart, thinking especially of all those in Ukraine. Faith and prayer is about our relationship with God. Jesus formed intimate relationships with his disciples, so we are invited to enter into a relationship with him. The second theme that we can take from this morning’s Gospel is that of unity, togetherness, where all might be united as one. Unfortunately as we look at the events and actions of our present world we tend to see disunity, division and strong disagreement. How can the Russian Orthodox Church support Putin’s actions in the Ukraine? News and

the reporting of what happens becomes selective of what those in power wish their subjects to hear and read. "False news!" we say. There appears, at the moment, the greatest possibility of a Third World War in my lifetime. Yet ironically Putin's actions seem to have brought about an even greater unity around NATO, the UN and the EU. Today is the International day of United Nations Peacekeepers. Let us continue to pray for all peacekeepers and for an end to all hostilities in Ukraine.

We could easily highlight further divisions in our world. In America there is a renewed concern over the act of abortion, which is closely linked to how women are treated worldwide. Race and gender issues continue to cause unrest and violence; during the pandemic we saw the rise of anti-vaxxers; the great debate over climate change continues; and our little island appears as though it has never before been more divided between those who have and those who have not, as the cost of living rises makes great demands. Jesus was praying especially for unity among his disciples and among those who would hear his good news and become part of his worldwide church. Of course there continues to be disunity here as well concerning women priests, gender issues, same sex marriage to name but a few. Yet it is fair to say over the last 10 years the Church has made good steps forward in some of these matters.

The oneness for which Jesus prays is multi-dimensional - oneness with God, oneness with the Son, and oneness with others through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus prays that those who follow him may be drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity (more of that next week). Jesus' proposal for unity, rather than standing against something, is to create allies and stand for something. This is the divine unity that stands for healing, for forgiveness, for feeding the hungry, for clothing the naked, for reintegration into society. So the Church must be at one in a way that reflects Jesus' values rather than the values of the world. It should concentrate on seeking the many points of agreement, rather than arguing over differences – concentrate on being agents of change in a material world – concentrate on bringing physical, emotional and spiritual unity – concentrate on expressing unity by who and what it embraces, rather than what it rejects.

Soon we will come to that great place of unity, the Lord's Table, where all are welcome. We will say together:

"Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread."

Here we lay aside differences and disagreements; here we are united across all traditional barriers of race, custom, gender or class; here we are nourished with the cup of forgiveness, of cleansing and healing, with the cup of love so that we may proclaim that love, made known to us through Jesus Christ; here we bring people to know and love God. Here may we all be made one in Him, through Him and for Him, as He is one in the Father. So come let us sing, pray and dance as one to our Lord for surely He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,

To improvise a music of our own,

To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,

Three notes resounding from a single tone,

To sing the End in whom we all begin;

Our God beyond, beside us and within