**Sermon on John 17 v 20 – 26**

**Sunday 29th May 2022**

**In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen**

All of the readings this morning are about our relationship with God and Jesus. In the reading from Revelation we have a joyous message of hope and the wonderful reward waiting for all who believe in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. In Acts in the story of Paul and Silas we are encouraged to praise God no matter what our circumstances and in the Gospel reading Jesus prays for our unity together in Christ.

As most of you probably know I like images to help me understand how to do things and I love this image for prayer. I have shared this with you before but I find it very helpful so thought I would share it with you again.

A hospital chaplain visited a delightful old lady in hospital. As he approached her he noticed that with the index finger of one hand she was touching, one by one the fingers of the other hand with her eyes closed. When the chaplain spoke to her she opened her eyes and said ‘Ah minister I was just saying my prayers – the prayers my grandmother taught me many years ago’ the chaplain looked puzzled and she went on to explain. ‘I hold my hand like this, my thumb towards me. That reminds me to pray for those nearest to me. Then there is my pointing finger, so I pray for those who point the way to others – teachers, leaders, parents. The next finger is the biggest so I pray for those in high places. After that comes the weakest finger – look it cannot stand up on its own so I pray for the sick and lonely and the afraid and this little one – well last of all I pray for myself’.

I hope for those of you who like me enjoy images that one will prove helpful.

I am quite sure however that Jesus did not need imagery to help him pray but in this chapter of John’s gospel we find a lengthy prayer that Jesus offers at the Last Supper and today’s reading comes at the end of that prayer. Jesus prays for his disciples that they might be one even as he and the father are one. He prays that his followers in every generation will be thus united, for it is by this unity that the world will come to believe that he has been sent by the Father.

Jesus wants his disciples to be one. This seems like a safe request until we consider it closely! Jesus wants his disciples to be one in a world marked by countless divisions of one group of people over and against another. The division of Christians is contrary to what Jesus wants.

I believe that when Jesus looks at Christians, he does not see us as isolated individuals. He recognises us as persons, certainly, but as persons in community with one another. He does not see us as apart from each other. His vision indeed is that we are one. If that is how Jesus sees us, then maybe that needs to be the way we Christians see ourselves. St. Paul caught this message and he echoes it when he declares in his letter to the Galatians that in Christ there is ‘no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus ‘.

Earlier in the chapter Jesus prayed for unity, protection from the evil one and for sanctity (holiness). Knowing Jesus prayed for us should give us confidence as we work for his Kingdom. Jesus wanted his disciples to become one. He wanted them unified as a powerful witness to the reality of God’s love.

However God doesn’t want us all to be clones all alike. He demands unity, not uniformity. We can be different, but we should have the same aims in sharing and living the gospel. We do not want to be like processionary caterpillars. Ralph Milton tells of how John Henry Fabre a French naturalist did an experiment with these caterpillars. In Milton’s words:

*These poor little beasties will follow the next caterpillar ahead of them no matter where that caterpillar is going. Fabre arranged a bunch of his fuzzy friends in a neat circle each one touching the one just ahead. Faithful to their DNA each one followed the next one. In the middle of the circle Fabre put some of the caterpillars’ favourite food. Would they stop following even for a moment just for a bite of lunch. Not on your life. The food was there within inches, but they just kept on following each other in circles until they collapsed and died from hunger.*

Jesus is not talking about uniformity, reducing everyone to a dull and flat sameness. Instead the differences are to be barriers no longer. The diversity is not a cause for antagonism. It is to be revealed as what it is: an enrichment for everyone.

Jesus prayed for unity among believers based on believers’ unity with him and the Father. Christians can know unity among themselves if they are living in unison with God.

Jesus is not calling for something he was able to accomplish easily with his own disciples. In his own mission, Jesus encountered James and John competing to see who was worthy to sit beside Jesus in heaven- and another time, disciples who argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Remember also Matthew the publican who had a collaborator record of working alongside the Romans as a tax collector, becoming a member of the same band of followers that included a zealot who was committed to getting rid of those like Matthew. Don’t forget too, according to the gospels, Judas being prepared to betray his master despite many months of being on the road with Jesus. Even after the events of that first Easter, Paul as a new comer to the faith was still to have his falling out with Peter and James.

Jesus modelled an acceptance of difference. He did not choose disciples from uniform back grounds and nor did he accept traditional exclusions. Touching lepers, talking to the rejected of society, noticing the good in traditional enemies of Judaism; these things showed he was open to a unity of spirit.

Today we have many different people in churches. Differing race, ages, sex, jobs, abilities, temperaments … the list goes on. But one thing unites us and that is our belief in Christ.

Jesus’s great desire for his disciples was that they would become one. He wanted them unified as a powerful witness to the reality of God’s love. So are we helping to unify the body of Christ, the church? Do we pray for other Christians, avoid gossip, build others up and support them, work together in humility and give our time and money, exalt Christ and refuse to get side-tracked arguing over divisive matters?

Jesus prayed for unity among the believers based on the believers’ unity with him and the Father. Christians can know unity among themselves if they are living in unison with God.

**I close with a story of unity:**

A holy man was having a conversation with the Lord one day and said. "Lord, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like.

The Lord led the holy man to two doors.

He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water. The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful.

But because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight and thought of their eternal misery and suffering.

The Lord said, "You have seen Hell.

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

The holy man said, "I don't understand."

"It is simple," said the Lord. "It requires but one skill. You see they have learned the secret to happiness..... feed one another."

Amen