

'They shall be one'

John 17:20-26 (Acts 16:16-34)

8.5.16 C,H(HC) B (Evensong)

I know that I have found great comfort, especially at certain times in knowing that people are praying for me. But surely what we hear from John's Gospel today is the ultimate of this.

Jesus prayer just before he was to die, was for 'those who will believe in me through the disciples' message' ie. **us**. Jesus was praying for us then and is still praying for us from his throne as our risen and ascended Saviour - He knows our needs before we do and prays for us. He knows our fears and doubts, concerns about what we'll be facing and he prays for us.

How amazing is that?

In this instance Jesus is particularly praying about our relationships with each other - He prays to his Father 'that all of them may be one just as you are in me and I am in you'. So the model for our relationships with each other should be shaped by nothing less than the perfect unity within God – the relationship between the Father and the Son. What an ideal to live up to! It's a kind of oneness which is 'supernatural' - not generally characteristic of the human race. It is more normal for humans to be divided, to push for their own ideals, be independent of each other.

In contrast, the kind of oneness which Jesus is describing, that unity which **is** characteristic of the Godhead is a special kind of love from God which tears down the barriers which we erect between each other. Christian unity transcends differences and joins people together in love.

So how can we ever hope to live out this kind of unity?

Jesus says 'I have given them **the glory** that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me '.

So it seems that **glory** is key to enabling this kind of oneness between us. I've always found it quite hard to imagine exactly what 'glory' is.

I think of God's glory as those things that are attractive and inspiring. His endless grace and mercy. His unconditional love, His utter goodness and rightness. His sovereign authority, His creative power ...

God's glory is the reality of his active presence. In the Bible we read of the presence of God being seen in the bright cloud which led Israel through the wilderness and rested in the tabernacle, the bright light of the angels announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds, the bright light in Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

God's glory is the revelation of his character and presence, God making himself known to us so we can see him as he really is. The Father is revealed to the Son who then in turn reveals his character to us, a character of excellence, praiseworthiness, holiness and goodness, and active presence. Not only do we receive glory but Paul says that those who turn to the Lord 'reflect the Lord's glory (and) are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' (2 Cor 3:18) So the lives of Jesus' followers reflect his character and he is present in the world through them.. As Jesus says 'I in them and you in me'. This is the amazing reality of being one with God; Us in God, and The Father, Son and Spirit all is us.

Do our lives really reveal Jesus' character and presence in this way?
And what does this have to do with unity?

Well, it's as each of us seeks to know Jesus better in our hearts and display his likeness that we will grow together as a body of Christians. It is as we see / understand / believe the characteristics and person of God (his glory) that we are drawn to him and away from our foolish and selfish desires. His will becomes our desire and we therefore become closer to others who are also drawn to His glory. We will all be facing the same way as we focus on him. Imagine a patch of sunflowers all facing towards the sun, all looking the same way and each soaking in that brightness and reflecting it outwards towards each other and those around us.

'I have given them the glory.... so they may be one'

In the story we heard from Acts, Paul and Silas are certainly full of God's glory and presence as they're singing and worshipping. Despite being falsely accused and put in prison, they display great love and praise for God. They are happy in God because they have seen something in Him which gives them great joy. This is what it means to behold His glory,

And the effect of this is to show God to the other prisoners and the jailer with amazing results.

Jesus also prays for us to work together to be a powerful witness to the reality of God's love to let the world know that he has been sent by the father. We sang ' By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another'.

When things are going well, there's not much to see but when we come to the place where there is a difficult issue to resolve, and we exhibit uncompromised principles but at the same time observable love, then there is something that those outside the church can see, something they can use to judge that these really are Christians, and that Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father. So let's pray that others will catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God by the way we love and respect each other, and by how we're able to confront and forgive each other, speaking the truth in love. And that as a result, we will all be drawn closer to the throne of God's grace, and our church will prosper and grow.

In reality, Jesus' prayer is so often hindered from being answered both by individual Christians and by Church organisations. This happens when we love our own creeds, rituals and ideas more than we love Christ. Unity is always important in the church but at this time especially, if we are wanting our church to grow during the interregnum rather than diminish, then our unity is more important now than ever. We need to remember that if we become divided and at odds with each other, our witness will be lost, and those

outside, or on the edge of our fellowship will fail to take our message seriously.

We may feel that with Hilary moving on we have no leader. We may be worrying that things will fall apart, with disagreements between people or groups. Stories of churches during interregnums show that there is a real danger of this happening. But let's remember, Jesus is the head of the body. We have not lost our overall leader at all! We must look to him, ask him to reveal his will for us (seek his glory) then work together. Remember the sunflowers?

This means praying, individually and together, for guidance and wisdom for each other as we work things out during the interregnum. Praying is the vital thing to do because prayer works – if we want our church to thrive we have to keep talking to and listening to its head committing ourselves to putting His will above our own preferences!

(Archbishops: (re; 'Great Wave of Prayer' leading up to Pentecost) suggested three areas that Christians taking part in the prayer week could pray for:

- *that all Christians find new life in their relationship with Jesus Christ;*
- *that all those who they meet and are close to see something of Jesus that draws them towards faith in him;*
- *that the Church is "so full of the life and joy of Christ that it overflows with the reality of the presence of Jesus."*

Pray alone or together – opportunities: Tues/Thurs morning prayers, homegroups, Prayer breakfast)

To be one as the body of Christ doesn't mean we are all going to think the same way about everything. We will have different ideas as to how we want to worship, the exact details of what we believe. Things will go wrong if we love these things more than we love each other and our God. We will fall out

when we struggle to remember that Jesus is head of the church. So let's remember - what's most important is who we believe in, who we look to as leader.

Some practical ideas for unifying the body of Christ

- Pray for each other
- Avoid gossip
- Build each other up
- Work together in humility
- Give time and money
- Refuse to get side-tracked into arguing over divisive matters and most important of all, in everything we do :
- Exalt Christ!

As I said at the beginning, it's a great confidence booster and encouragement to remember that Jesus prayed for us and continues to pray for us. That he is there at God's right hand, ascended in glory, praying for us. Jesus says to the Father '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.' He wants us to see his glory (v24) - to reveal himself to us, both now (in part) and ultimately in completeness.

Let's pray for that glory to make known more and more of God's character to us, in us and through us as we look to him as our Lord and leader and live together as his body.

As I look out at all these faces... do I see sunflowers all soaking in God's glory, radiantly displaying God's character, working together, all facing towards him.....?