

Easter 7 C      St Stephen's 9.30 & 11      Jn 17: 21  
29.5.22

“..... that they may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

If we were to go out carry out a 'vox pop' on the meaning of Christianity, there would undoubtedly be a number of responses. “It's about love.” “It's doing good.” “It's loving your neighbor.” “It's loving God.” To my mind, to sum up our faith in a word, its about relationships – with God and with others, especially within the Church; and what defines those relationships is self-giving love.

Given that we have life's bare necessities, then it's our relationships which give life meaning. The following well-known summary makes this clear:

Money can buy you a house, but it can't buy you a home.  
Money can buy you insurance, but it can't buy you security.  
Money can buy you entertainment, but it can't buy you happiness.  
Money can buy you medicine, but it can't buy you health.  
Money can buy you a bed, but it can't buy you sleep.  
Money can buy you companionship, but it can't buy you friendship.  
Money can buy you sex, but it can't buy you love.

And what lies behind many of these choices is that they rely upon our relationships. I think it is true to say that in spite of troubles, ill health or poverty, we can still know a deep inner peace because we are cared for.

I have no doubt that it is the quality of our relationships with God and within the family and with friends, colleagues and neighbours that enables us to live happy and fulfilled lives.

For many it is the relationship with God which is sadly lacking. It's this which so many find nagging away through their lives in spite of everything seeming to be going well, and yet still there's feeling that something is missing. St Augustine captured this in his prayer when he said: "Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have our being, who has made us for thyself so that our hearts are restless till they rest in thee ....."

In any discussion about words we need to be sure what it is we mean. Just as the word "love" can mean anything from self-sacrifice to lust, so we need to be sure about the word "relationship". Jesus makes this clear in the gospel reading this morning. There he prays to his Father that his followers may share the same unity that Jesus has with God; and may also share this unity with one another.

It is, of course, self-giving love which lies behind every word in the gospel. But this love isn't complete in itself. Love has to flow outward to embrace others. The love which binds the Trinity, which is God, reaches out to Jesus' followers "so that the world might believe."

The NT has a number of words which it uses to describe the Church, which is the fellowship of Christ's followers. It's a body, a vine, a building. All have implicitly within them the picture of a unity of purpose without which they will not hold together. It is the purpose of the Church to demonstrate this unity of love which springs from the Father.

You only have to look at history to see that the Church has been a sorry example of this unity of love and purpose, not only between denominations, but also within churches and congregations. I can remember my mother telling me that as a child she was horrified by the bitchiness and plain cruelty which was evident in the members of the chapel her family attended, and which took her a lifetime to overcome.

The following begins to captures the state of the relationships between the churches;

The Methodists bring down the sheep from the mountains;

The Roman Catholics let them gambol in the fields;

The Presbyterians put them in order;

The Baptists dip them;

And the Church of England fleeces them.

Or, as Bp Vaughan said:

“We of the church today stubbornly refuse the kick down these crazy barriers ..... refuse to upset our inherited prejudices ..... while the world slips into the embrace of evil.”

In 1745, George Whitfield, preaching in Philadelphia, said this: “Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Ayn Episcopalians? Presbyterians? Independents or Seceders? Have you any Methodists? And Abraham’s answer: ‘We don’t know those names here!’

I have a suspicion that the indifference, even hostility, of many people today to the Church, and the consequent money and staffing problems which all denominations face, are God’s judgement upon us for our disunity. This should have forced us to take the call to unity far more seriously, and to begin again to demonstrate this unity before the world. The Church of England has another critical fault to contend with, which is the transfer of power from the parishes to the centre brought about, I believe, by a lack of theological thinking to order the Church’s affairs, and relying too much on a business orientation.

We will only begin to find this unity with God and with one another if we learn from our Lord. And what was it that bound him and the Father into one? It was prayer.

It is as we open ourselves to God in prayer, and share in prayer with one another that we shall see the unity for which Jesus prayed become a reality.

The two Archbishops some time ago sent out a letter calling all congregations, and all individual Christians to join in prayer for our nation:

That we may all deepen our relationship to Christ;  
 That we may have confidence in sharing the gospel;  
 That all may respond to the call of Jesus, to live out the gospel, and to seek God's Kingdom from day to day.

As the Archbishops write:

"At the heart of our prayers will be the words that Jesus Christ himself taught us - "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." It is impossible to overstate the life-transforming power of the Lord's Prayer. It is the prayer which is reassuring enough to be on the lips of the dying yet dangerous enough to be banned in cinemas. It is famous enough to be spoken each day by billions in hundreds of languages and yet intimate enough to draw us ever closer into friendship with Jesus Christ. It is simple enough to be memorized by small children and yet profound enough to sustain a whole lifetime of prayer. When we pray it with sincerity and with joy, there is no imagining the new ways in which God can use us to his glory."

Tennyson wrote:

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world  
 dreams of:

For what, are men better than sheep or goats  
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer  
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?

He was a Christian and he prayed. He asked for strength to do greater things, but was given infirmity that he might do better things. He asked for power that he

might have the praise of men; he was given weakness that he might feel the need of God.

Paul Sebastian, as eccentric minister at St Ives, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bequeathed money to his chapel in his will, saying: “..that the money provide 6 Bibles every year, for which 6 men and 6 women are to throw dice on Whit Tuesday after morning service, the minister kneeling the while at the south end of the communion table, and praying to God to direct the luck to his glory.”

Joking apart, to quote again from the Archbishops’ letter:

“The dream is this: imagine every Anglican, perhaps every Christian, in this nation praying together with the specific intention that all may come to know Jesus as Lord, We profoundly hope that you ..... will want to be part of this great movement of prayer. Evangelism is the work of God, and it begins as we seek him in prayer.” Maybe Paul Sebastian was not so misguided as he prayed for his Bible gamblers. And don’t forget Church Prayers on the first Monday each month – even if you can’t be there, pray at home or at work for our church and for our outreach, and especially with those who come for baptism.