

THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE

Acts 16. 16-34

Revelation 22. 12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17. 20-26

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, marks an in-between time, between the Ascension of our Lord and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The gospel reading that is appointed for the Seventh Sunday of Easter turns to the gospel of John. This passage is the conclusion of Jesus's final prayer before departing for the Garden of Gethsemane and the events of the Passion. It is not, however, just a prayer that we should read during Holy Week; it is a prayer that looks to the future. Christ was praying not only for the people seated around him at table that evening, but also for his future followers (which, thanks be to God, includes us). And it is a prayer that focuses on unity, on our all being one.

I suspect that as the disciples gathered for what would be their final meal with our Lord (although they did not know it at the time) they did not feel as if they were 'one'. No doubt, they were frightened and uncertain; they were insecure; they were scrappy and squabbling. Peter was petulant, Judas was plotting, and James and John were probably still jockeying for promotions. Did it change after the Ascension? Probably not. And those of us who have been members of various churches for many years know that even today, the Christian Church acts as if it is anything but 'one'.

As it was for the disciples then, so too is it crucial for us today to return to Jesus's prayer, for it describes his hope, his vision, and his picture of what we, his followers, are to look like; and how we are to live our lives together. It is very clear that his

words are meant for everyone, then and now, as he prays for ‘those who will believe in me’ (17. 20) through the words of his disciples.

Firstly, Christ’s prayer is for *community*. Our Lord prays in verse 22 ‘that they may be one’. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole. According to Christ, there are to be no solitary Christians or spiritual ‘Lone Rangers’. And secondly, within that community, our Lord’s prayer in verse 21 is for *unity*: ‘that they may *all* be one’.

Jesus wants his disciples to be one. This seems like a rather straightforward request, until we take a closer look. And when we take a closer look, whether it be at ourselves or at the Church-at-large, we see evidence of disagreements, resentments, unforgiveness and division. Yet Christ wants his disciples to be *one* in a world that is marked by countless divisions of one group of people against another. Christian unity is not intended by our Lord to be simply an in-house issue. We may not realise it, but it is actually essential to our witness in the world. As Jesus says in verse 23 of his prayer, ‘that they may become completely one, *so that the world may know* that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ Christ’s prayer reminds us that our ‘oneness’ and our unity is to be a sign to the world of God’s love for us. Oneness and unity are about love.

Let us be clear. When we speak of oneness and unity, and when our Lord speaks about oneness and unity, he is not talking about uniformity. The goal is not to reduce everyone to a dull and flat sameness. Instead, our differences are to be barriers no longer. Diversity is to be welcomed; but it is not to be a cause for antagonism. Rather, it is to be revealed in its best light, that is, a source of enrichment for everyone. This means that when there are conflicts (and conflicts are inevitable, even in the Church), we are to pay close attention to them; and to resolve them in a right manner. As we all know, unresolved conflict never goes away; it just sinks to a deeper

level. And if nothing is done about unresolved conflict, it festers, grows and leads to even worse conflicts in the future.

When we live and work together in the name of Jesus, we present a clear witness of faith to the world around us. Others catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God by the way we love and respect each other, and by how we are able to confront and forgive each other, speaking the truth in love. As a result, they are drawn closer to the throne of God's grace, and the Church-at-large prospers and grows.

But we must not forget that the opposite is also true. When we are divided and at odds with each other, our witness is lost, and the world fails to take our message seriously.

It was E. Stanley Jones, the famous missionary and theologian who once said, 'Talk about *what* you believe and you have disunity. Talk about *Who* you believe in and you have unity.' Jesus is the one who bring us together and in whom we find unity.

I would like to close my talk with a true story.

A young boy, about 11 years old, sat under a tree in his Indonesian village. An older English woman sat next to him, and listened as he quietly recounted the story of the camping trip his Sunday School class had recently taken into the bush. On the last day of their trip, as they began to return home on foot, the class was spotted by a band of Laskar Jihad militants patrolling the area.

Led by their Sunday School teacher, the class fled into a copse of trees hoping to evade the militants. Very near to the copse were some goat herders; and the militants stopped to ask the shepherds if they had seen a group of children. The shepherds denied seeing anyone, and the militants departed. As it was growing late in the day,

the students took shelter overnight in an abandoned Red Cross field station. The next morning, just as they were setting out for home, the militants returned.

They seized the teacher, wrapped him in the Sunday School banner and killed him in front of the children. The leader of the militants threatened that if any one of the children did not deny Christ, the same thing would happen to them. This threat was met by silence from the children. So the leader pulled one boy out of the group and commanded him to deny Christ. When he said nothing, they chopped off his arm. The leader, crouching down, looked into the boy's face and said, 'I don't want to hurt you, deny Christ and we will let you go'. The boy replied, 'But I am a soldier for Christ'. So, the militants chopped off his other arm. Again, the leader told the boy that if he denied Christ his friends would live. The boy replied, 'I don't know, what else I can tell you. My life belongs to Christ.' So the leader eviscerated the young boy and he died.

The shepherds, whom the militants questioned the day before, were seen to be driving their herd of goats towards this scene. When the militants caught sight of them, they simply got back in their truck and drove off. The class, aided by the shepherds, returned to their village without further incident.

The English woman, who sat under the tree listening as a child told her about a Sunday School camping trip, is a woman who has dedicated her life to documenting the plight of persecuted Christians in some of the world's most troubled regions.¹ Ever since I heard that story, I have not forgotten that boy; nor have I wanted to forget him. In the face of cold hatred, and hacked to pieces, he preached a simple sermon with his life: 'What else can I tell you... I belong to Christ.'

¹ She works for the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust. Their website can be found at www.hart.uk.org.

Dear friends, you and I belong to Christ. He is the source of our oneness. He is the source of our unity. Let us never betray him, or what he wants us to be.

Amen.