

JOHN 17: 20-26 Jesus' Prayer for us

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Lord Jesus, may we hear your word, and may it change our lives.
Amen.

I once went with some Roman Catholic friends to a Mass and really felt part of all that was happening, especially when the reading was from John's first letter and was all about living in love and union with God and with each other. But then, as we stood up to receive communion, my friend told me just to carry the service sheet with me and the priest would know to give me a blessing, not communion. Do you know, that felt a real slap in the face.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of you may remember me talking about the Protestant church we went to in France where the preacher went on and on about were we sure we were in the right state of mind and spirit and therefore FIT to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, and that felt equally exclusive.

At first sight, this sort of division among Christians is what today's reading is about. It comes at the end of a chapter which is all Jesus' prayer to his Father. In it John shows us the intimacy that is there between Jesus and his Father. Firstly Jesus prays for himself and then he goes on to pray for his disciples. In this last part, he moves the focus out onto the wider world and prays for those who "believe in me because of their message" because of the words and witness of those first disciples gathered with Jesus in the upper room on the night before he died.

So, in effect, these verses are Jesus' prayer for *us*, for you and me, for the whole church that has grown and spread because those first disciples believed in Jesus and told everyone about him. It is still astonishing to look back and wonder that the church as we see it

today, spread throughout the world, still going after over 2,000 years, all started with a dozen ordinary blokes. It has been pointed out that the church is only ever one generation away from extinction: all it would take is for a single generation not to hand the word on. Happily, that has never happened. People have always told other people, have always shared the love, the life, the joy and peace that they have found in knowing the Lord Jesus. May we all do the same!

Sadly though, we have to recognise that the church hasn't made a very good job of living as Jesus prays here that we shall live, united in our love of God and of each other. I was in the north of Skye in April, and it is shocking to find up there a tiny village, a hamlet really, no shop, not even a pub, just a handful of houses. But there they had a Presbyterian church. They also had a Free Church of Scotland Church, which had split from the original. Then there had been a further fall-out, and there was a third church which had split off from the Church of Scotland. I found that pretty shocking. Three separate churches in that tiny little community. I doubt if there were enough people for there to be more than 10 folk in each congregation!

We have to admit that the Christian church has a poor record when it comes to unity. We're not talking uniformity here: we don't all have to worship in the same way; we might prefer to organise ourselves in different ways; we might not even believe exactly the same things. But we are called upon to love one another, to accept one another. If we really did, and if we really loved Christ, no church would exclude anyone who was Christ's disciple. We would welcome each other with joy. But the divisions and barriers that have built up over centuries will not just disappear. There seems to be a human tendency for us to divide rather than unite, tribalism we call it. Christ came to overcome that tendency.

He prays that we may have in us the power of love which is stronger than the tendency to divide, to make ourselves exclusive. Our lack of unity denies the power of Christ's love.

When people see Christians so divided, aren't they bound to question the truth of the Christian faith? It is surely our duty to demonstrate that unity which is the answer to Christ's prayer.

The Churches Together groups work towards this, and they function better in some places than others. Our own Heartbeat group was a good example, with people from several different denominations coming and sharing worship and stories of faith. We have the Oakworth Manor, carol singing and Carols in the Barn as joint ventures with the Methodists, but we still have a long way to go here in Oakworth. Let's hope many of us can take up the Methodists' invitation for us to join their canal trip next month. It is lovely for us to welcome John and Barbara Lund from Slack Lane Baptists into the congregation at Newsholme.

Unity between Christians is an important message in these verses, but it is not the only one. And the main message is probably what we need to hear most, because it is the key to bringing about real unity between us.

Jesus says: 'I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me. . . may they be one, just as you and I are one: I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me.' Jesus, or John as he recalls this prayer of Jesus, definitely wants us to get the message. But do we really get it? All this you in me, and me in them, and all completely one?

We don't usually talk in that way. But remember, these are the very last words that Jesus speaks to his disciples as they are gathered together. Straight after this, Jesus is arrested and they are parted. So this is the final message that Jesus wants to impart to his followers. And it is all about relationship. Jesus knows that all he is and all he does comes from God, because he has submitted his own will entirely to God. He has come to God as 'Abba', as loving Father, and has abandoned himself, abandoned his ego if you like, to God, giving himself *to* God and receiving *from* God the life of love and power that we see him living in the Gospels. Jesus knows that God longs to have this intimate relationship with us, with all of us who come to him, drawn by Jesus.

Did you realise that God wants you to have the same relationship with him that Jesus had? Can you accept that God wants to be in you and you in him? This isn't easy for us to take on board, is it? Especially if we've grown up with the idea that God is up there somewhere, in the beyond, in heaven, a being of great power who must be obeyed, or else! A God who is watching our every move and preparing to judge us. It's not easy to love a God like that. Even if your idea of God is that of a benevolent old man gently smiling down – well, that's a bit more approachable. But it's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is expressing his own deeply intimate relationship with God. We call Jesus the Son of God, because he is the one human being who has allowed his human self to be entirely filled with the Holy Spirit of God so that it is indeed God who lives in him. They have become one. Jesus shows us what a human being can be, what a truly, fully human looks like once he has surrendered completely to God.

We know God wants us to live in relationship with him. We know he wants us to love and obey him, to trust and adore him.

But for many of us, he is still 'God out there' somewhere. We talk of Christmas as the 'incarnation', when God takes on flesh in the human form of Jesus. But Jesus shows us that the Spirit of God is present in *all of life*, all creation is infused with, is filled with God's Spirit, all living creatures breathe the breath of God. As the Psalmist asked God "Where then could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence?" For this is God, the source and power of life and love, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, as St Paul put it.

And this same God wants to live in you, and wants you to live in him, so that we shall all be one with him and one with each other. This is heady stuff, but you read these words and you can't escape the fact. No wonder Jesus gave us the Eucharist and told us to remember his words every time we celebrate it: for as we take the bread and the wine, we take them into our selves, into our own bodies, so that they become part of us. We take the body and blood of Jesus into ourselves to remind us that he wants to live his life in us and wants us to live in him, trusting him, depending on him, listening to him, obeying him, letting ourselves be led and guided by him in everything, receiving from him all we need.

Most of us have a long way to go, I think. For some of us, it might even seem strange, almost blasphemous, to imagine that kind of deeply intimate relationship with the God who created the universe. Yet when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he tells *us* to call God 'Abba', the child's affectionate term for Father.

Think of the closest relationship you have ever had with another human being. For some of us, that will be the love we've shared with a spouse. And remember that the church is often referred to as 'the bride of Christ'. The total surrender of our self to the other in marriage, as demonstrated in truly loving sexual intercourse, that is the kind of surrender we owe to God. And as we give, so we

receive. I hope I'm not shocking anyone here. Mostly we don't want to surrender that completely to God. But that is how Jesus lived, and that is how he calls us to live. That is how many of the saints have lived. Remember St Paul says: 'It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.' (Gal.2:20) That is the kind of relationship that the great mystics describe.

For many people, their understanding of being a Christian means just trying to live a decent life and not harming other people. There's nothing wrong with that. But that isn't quite what Jesus calls us to. He wants so much more for us. He wants us to enjoy life in all its fullness. Yes, we are to live a good life, but we are also to live in the power of God's love and of God's Spirit, so that others will see and know that they too can have that life in them, that they too can be one with God, and one with each other. If you are ready for this adventure with God, you might try praying this prayer of Jesus and putting your own name in wherever Jesus says 'they'. Then wait and see what happens! Amen.