

May 16th, 2010

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

In our reading from John's Gospel we encounter a section from the 'High Priestly Prayer' –the longest and one of the most touching of Jesus' recorded prayers. The setting is the Last Supper in the Upper Room. Jesus is preparing himself and his disciples for time when he will no longer be with them physically after his ascension.

Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples and for all believers then, now and to come. In the prayer, Jesus' love for them is palpable. It is a poignant prayer: tender and caring in tone, solemn in expression, merciful in character and evoking deep pathos. It is as if his impending departure is as difficult for Jesus as it is for the disciples who are understandably anxious and worried about life in his absence. George Eliot wrote: "Only in the agony of parting do we look into the depths of love." Jesus prays that through the testimonies of the disciples more will come to believe in him as the one sent by God. He continues to pray that all believers may be united in order to continue Christ's mission.

It is also a prayer that looks forward with hope to the eschatological time - to the continuation of his ministry through the disciples until Christ returns and all creation will be renewed and God's kingdom will come and all believers will be brought to share with the Father and the Son at the banquet table in heaven. It is Jesus' will and desire that we be with him where he is.

The heart of Jesus' prayer is unity and glorification of God. Jesus prays in verse 22:

"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one: I in them and you in me, that they become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

I have to confess that this is a very complex passage and, typical of the evangelist John, is deeply profound and christological. The emphasis in this phrase is on unity. It is a unity that is analogous to the unity of love and obedience between Jesus and the Father. Just as Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him and they become one, so all believers are to be in the Father and the Son. We are one in the Father and the Son. This kind of unity comes about through the work and gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that unites us in God and Christ and gives God the glory. It is a unity that reflects our collective participation in the unity of love and obedience that binds the Father and the Son.

It would be mistaken to think of this union as merely a spiritual one. This union should be a visible manifestation of the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit in us. As a church - the physical embodiment of the body of Christ – we are the revelation to the world of the redemptive work of Christ: we partake in his death, resurrection and glorious ascension to heaven. The Spirit unites all divisions. Our unity with him does not abolish our personal distinction but the walls that separate us as individuals come down and we are drawn deeper into the world and into God's love. The world must not only hear but see that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

A few weeks ago, I was in Toxteth, Liverpool for Holy Week on a mission experience with eleven others from Ridley Hall. We were all attached to different churches in the area. We worked with six churches including three Anglican churches that together formed a team ministry; a Baptist Church, a Nigerian Pentecostal Church and a Chinese Pentecostal Church. One very memorable event was on the night of Good Friday, when members from those churches came together to carry the Cross into the city centre. Our purpose on that night was simply to witness and proclaim the Good News of Christ for the glory of God. It was a very humbling experience to be one of a variety of Christians – Anglicans, Baptists, Pentecostals, blacks, whites, Asians- displaying unity in the name of Christ. The cross itself has the power to stop strangers on the street, to induce fear in others, to make others run away or even try to avoid us. I can confidently say that I saw signs of the Spirit of Christ at work powerfully.

This is an example of the unity that challenges the world to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. Jesus prays thus:

“that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:23

Our reading in Acts is illustrative. Paul and Silas are in prison. While there they experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. They are one in purpose and in action taken for each other, and in “praying and singing hymns.” Together they were in union with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. As they publically prayed and sang we read that ‘suddenly’ there was an earthquake and ‘at once’ the prison doors opened. These occurrences were signs of the Spirit of God at work, revealing God's presence and a necessary prelude to the really miraculous conversion and transformation of the jailor through faith. He very soon -literally ‘at the same hour’- acknowledged him need to be saved and asked what to do.

Paul and Silas displayed love for each other and for the jailor when they ministered to him and his family and baptised him. They did these things by virtue of Holy Spirit enabling them to be sharers in the love that the Father and the Son have for between themselves. Through their prayers and songs Paul and Silas had brought a jailor from the point of despair to a new hope. The jailor was a transformed man. As Luke records [the jailer] “brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.” In this way is the world convicted of the truth of Jesus Christ as the one sent by the Father and loved by him.

In this way too are the Father and the Son glorified. The Spirit glorifies the Son in the conversion and obedience of all members of the body to the Head and in the exercise of the gifts and ministries that the Spirit allocates to them.

The lives of Paul and Silas were signs of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them even in the pain and darkness of prison. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father in order that he may be closer to us and so that through the activity of the Spirit we might know Christ in us and be raised to divine life. The aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. So as Christ has ascended and we look forward to Pentecost, let us pray for the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, so that our lives may be signs of the Holy Spirit working in us to convince the world of sin and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work.

Amen.