

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 29th May 2022

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Readings:

Acts 16: 16-34

John 17: 20-26

What were you thinking as you heard that Gospel reading?

It must be one of the hardest passages of St John's Gospel to hear. Not as some are hard, because we feel ashamed of our humanity when we hear what humanity has done. Not as some are hard because they make us feel inadequate, or challenge us too much. This passage is hard because, quite simply, it's hard.

It's Jesus gathering his thoughts, the last words he's spoken as he prepares for what comes next. This is the end of a long speech to his disciples after washing their feet at the last supper, and these words are the last spoken before he goes out to the Kidron Valley to be betrayed by Judas Iscariot.

And perhaps it feels like the gathering of thoughts. Perhaps a bit scattered, perhaps at times a bit random, but if we stop and look more closely, it is a very careful pulling together of ideas about unity.

Jesus is speaking in front of his disciples, but is actually speaking to God. This is a prayer, Jesus' final prayer for those he loves, before he leaves them to his death.

And if we break this prayer down, what is it that Jesus longs for for his followers.

First, he prays that they may all be one. Unity among themselves, and care for each other.

Second, he prays that they may be united with God the Father and himself, as they are united with each other. Unity in the Godhead, and drawing God's people into that same unity.

Third, he prays that the world may see that God loves them as God loves Jesus himself. Unity in love, and unity that is visible to the world.

And fourth, he prays that they may be with him to see his glory. Unity in all times and all places from before the foundation of the world.

Four powerful prayers about unity. But this is Jesus' prayer, his final wish if you like, before his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. All else aside, this is the most important thing he can bring before God in this moment, that his disciples might be united with him, and with God, as he is united with God.

Unity was an important theme in the world of the time. The Israelites needed to be united if they were to stand up against the Romans. The Romans needed to be united if they were to keep control over Israel. Unity was perhaps seen as something of a military strength – unity in an army makes the army successful. Perhaps, having seen the current war in Ukraine, we could add to this other things that make an army successful, including pride, righteousness, and all the other things the Ukrainians have which the Russian leadership hadn't banked on!

But, unity mattered. And with these currents of military unity around Jesus' prayer, the disciples who heard him speak would have been in no doubt that there was a challenge ahead of them. They needed to be united because they needed to be successful in all that was to come, and because all that was to come was not going to be easy.

In our world today, we tend to shy away from the idea of the church as an army. Onward Christian Soldiers isn't sung very often, unless you come from Horbury, where it was written, and even I vow to thee my country has been questioned theologically in recent years because of the implications of war that sit behind it.

And yet, many of the principles of Jesus' prayer, the high priestly prayer as it's known, remain as relevant today as they have ever been.

And as we hear this prayer today, perhaps this should be our prayer, for our church, for our benefice, for our deanery, and for God's church across the world.

As Jesus prayed for his followers two thousand years ago, we pray today for unity, that we may be united with Christ, that through him, we may be united with God the Father, that we may be united amongst ourselves, and that we may see God's glory through all that we are and do in his name.

Perhaps it does feel like a loose collection of sayings when we read it quickly, but why not read this again later when you get home. Stop at each verse, and consider the prayer. What does this prayer say to you, and how are you shaped by Jesus' care for unity, in the church and in the world?