

## JOHN 17:20-26

### ST JOHN'S, 8.5.16, 9.30 am

#### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what Jesus prayed about? We often read in the gospels that Jesus went away alone to pray. But the only times we actually overhear Jesus at prayer all happened on the night of the Last Supper, and the following day, as he hung on the cross. The other gospel writers tell us what Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane just before he was arrested. All the gospels contain a selection of the 'words from the cross'. But by far the longest record we have of Jesus praying is here in John 17.

In John's gospel, after the Last Supper and before going to Gethsemane, Jesus spends a long time talking to his disciples. When he's finished talking, he starts praying, and his prayer takes up the whole of chapter 17. First, Jesus prays for himself; then he prays for his disciples; finally, in the passage we have before us, he prays for all believers through the ages. So this passage is what Jesus himself prayed for you and for me, just before he died!

As Jesus prays for us, his major concern is for the ways in which our life as a church will point other people to Jesus. Jesus envisages a cycle of events: firstly, in verse 20, the first disciples will tell other people about Jesus; secondly, other people will come to believe in Jesus; thirdly, Jesus prays that all these believers will be united; and fourthly, that their unity, as well as their message, will draw more people to believe (vv 21, 23).

As we think about the repercussions of Jesus' prayer for the life of this church, we'll look at it in two sections: firstly, Jesus prays for the unity of his disciples; secondly, Jesus prays for the conversion of the world.

#### JESUS PRAYS FOR THE UNITY OF HIS DISCIPLES

In these few verses, Jesus prays several times that all believers will be one (vv 21, 22, 23). The question is, what does this mean?

Jesus gives us several clues. In this passage, Jesus describes the unity of believers in these ways: *as you, Father, are in me and I am in you* (v 21); *I in them and you in me* (v 23); *the love you have for me may be in them, and so that I also may be in them* (v 26). In other words, Jesus is praying that we may be one in the same way as he and his heavenly Father are one. In fact, Jesus goes even further than this. We know that as Christians, we have eternal life, which is another way of saying that we have a close personal relationship with God. But as Jesus talks here about being in us, and about us being in God, he means that as believers, we actually take part in the life of God himself. Our unity isn't just a reflection of the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: our unity is part of God's unity.

Reading through John's gospel, we find a number of ways in which Jesus and his Father are one. They were one in the act of creation; in Jesus' teaching; in saving people; and in all that Jesus did in his life on earth. The unity of God the Father and God the Son is unity in purpose, in action, and in teaching. That's the kind of unity for which Jesus prays amongst us.

It's obvious that we can't achieve this kind of unity without God's help. Jesus mentions a number of ways in which God does help us.

Most fundamentally, only believers can be united like this. We need the deep sense of security which comes with knowing that God loves us even as he loves Jesus (v 23), before we can possibly commit ourselves to one another so unconditionally. Jesus promises us here that he'll continue to make God known to us (v 26). As Jesus continues to make God known to us, so we'll learn to love each other with the love which God the Father has for God the Son. Only God himself can give us this love.

Another way in which Jesus helps us to achieve unity is by giving us his glory. Jesus has given us his glory by revealing God the Father to us. Jesus revealed God the Father to us by his life and teaching, by his miracles, by his death, and by his resurrection. Jesus says here (v 22), that he's revealed God the Father to us, and given us the glory God gave him, so that we may be one.

When we look at the Church, it doesn't look much like Jesus' prayer is being answered! Both world-wide and nationally, the Church is divided into hundreds of denominations. And we often find it almost impossible to be united, even within our own congregations.

But despite all that, there's no need to despair. Remember, it was Jesus himself who prayed this prayer. If he assures us that our prayers will be answered, as he does on several occasions (eg 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:24), we can be absolutely certain that Jesus' own prayer

won't be denied. Even though it doesn't look like it, the Church *is* one. We may not see it until the last day, but we must believe it now. All Christians and all churches will one day love one another as the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father.

This may all seem very abstract or idealistic, but if we, the believers of St John Rhosnesni are going to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer, then we have to do something about it. Only God can create this unity. But we must do our bit, and make sure that the life of our congregations maintains and expresses the fact that we're one. In all our relationships with one another, we must support one another, we must be completely loyal to one another, and we must totally accept one another. Think about it. Can you say that's true of all your relationships within this congregation? What about your relationship with the 4.00 pm congregation? Or the Wednesday morning congregation?

More widely, as I've already said, the Church is divided into lots of denominations. The image we project to the world is one of division, not unity. But the answer doesn't necessarily involve expending all our energies in trying to bring all the denominations back into one. What we need to do is to work together as we seek to point people towards Jesus Christ. We need to take every opportunity we can to meet and worship with believers of other denominations, so we can get to know each other, and demonstrate our unity to the world. There are plenty of opportunities for us to join together, with St James', with other churches in the Mission Area, and across Wrexham as a whole. Do you make the effort to join in with events such as the Good Friday joint witness?

Or ecumenical services? Are you going to the united service for Christian Aid this evening? If you want the church of Jesus Christ to be one, if you want to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer, then you need to take every opportunity you can to meet and worship with believers of other churches and denominations.

### **JESUS PRAYS FOR THE CONVERSION OF THE WORLD**

When Jesus prayed for his followers to be one, it wasn't just for our sake. It was for the sake of the world, *so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me* (v 23).

There are two ways in which we can and must help other people come to know Jesus. Neither works without the other. The first is what we usually understand by the word 'evangelism'. In verse 20, Jesus prays for those who will believe *because of their message*. If other people are going to come to know Jesus for themselves, they need to hear the gospel explained to them, for "how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14).

The second way in which we can and must help other people come to know Jesus is by our unity. We've already seen that we can't achieve the kind of unity for which Jesus prays among his followers on our own: it's a gift from God. If we, Jesus' followers in St John's, show the people of Rhosnesni and Borras that we're truly one, we'll do three things: firstly, we'll show them something of who God is, as our unity reflects that of God the Father and God the Son; secondly, we'll attract people to Jesus, as our love for one another reflects that of God the Father for

God the Son; thirdly, if our life as a community attracts other people, and shows them who God is, then when we tell them about Jesus, our message will be a thousand times more powerful. Jesus prays that *the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me* (v 23). Your family, friends and neighbours can learn that from us, if we can be one.

The sad thing is that all too often, you and I prevent this from happening. How? By gossiping about each other. By being insensitive to each other's needs. By refusing to forgive each other. By criticising people cruelly behind their backs, rather than gently pointing out the problem to their faces. These are only a few of the things which make people think that Jesus' followers are no different to anyone else. We *all* need to search our hearts and to repent of anything we find which is hindering our effectiveness in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

As you all know, St John's has a particularly sad history in this area. At the prayer breakfast yesterday, we prayed particularly for the healing of relationships, for old grudges to be forgiven. We'll always live with the consequences of our past. But the Lord can and will transform our church family life, if only we can be honest with him and with each other about all that's happened in the past, and the pain we still carry. I can't expect you to be honest about your feelings if I'm not honest about my own. I carry scars caused by the battles of my early years here – feelings of hurt, betrayal and rejection, mainly inflicted by people who chose to leave St John's, people who I feel should have stayed and supported us all in rebuilding this church family. As we talked and

prayed together yesterday, it seemed to us that it could be helpful to provide a forum in which more people are able to share their own feelings about past issues within St John's, and seek the Lord's healing and peace.

## **CONCLUSION**

I hope and pray that in the future, we can rise to the challenge; that as a church family, we'll show the world our unity and our love for one another in such a way that people want to know our secret! This isn't easy – it will cost us to be honest and open with one another, and so to allow the Lord to heal us. But it will be worth it!

And I praise God that we don't create this unity - he does. God the Son prayed this prayer. Only God himself can answer it. He will answer his own prayer. He'll answer it here in St John's, across the churches of Wrexham, and in the wider Church, if only we'll allow him to do so.

Shortly before Jesus prayed this prayer, he promised the original disciples that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be with them for ever. Its through the Holy Spirit working amongst us that God will heal our wounds and make us one. And eventually, when Jesus comes back, we'll see the perfect and complete unity, and the full glory, which Jesus describes here. Then we'll join with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honour and glory and might, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13). Amen.