

JOHN 17:20-26

ST JOHN'S, 2.6.19, 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. And 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 terms of the Father and Son being in each other, and the Son being in his followers (vv 21, 23, 26). So 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.

According to John's gospel, 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.

Its 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 did this by his life and teaching, by his miracles, by his death, and by his resurrection. In v 22, Jesus says 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. 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 St John's?

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, worship and work with believers of other churches, 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. Will you be at the joint service with St James' at the end of this month? I have to say that I rarely see anyone from St John's at the occasional Mission Area services. Do you make the effort to join in with ecumenical services? Wrexham Worships might not be your style, but there are usually three more traditional ecumenical services over the course of the year. There are plenty of opportunities to work together. I know that some of you volunteer at the hospital, with Feeding the Roofless, or with Church and Community Night Shelter. 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 worship and work 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 sent me and loved them even as you 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 *through their word*. 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. Jesus prays that *the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me* (v 23). Your family, friends and neighbours can learn that from us, if we can be one.

As you all know, St John's has a particularly sad history in this area. I know it's difficult with three congregations meeting at very different times. But when I hear people sniping at or about each other, complaining that he doesn't dress properly, or she doesn't do her job properly; when I hear that these complaints are being made about established members of the church to those who've joined us recently –

then I know that the rifts aren't being allowed to heal. I'm a relative newcomer to St John's, and I carry the scars of my early years here – feelings of hurt, betrayal and rejection. I know that those who've been here longer than I carry deeper wounds. But, I beg you, take those wounds to the Lord for healing, and pray for relationships to be healed, old grudges forgiven, and for the unity for which our Lord, Jesus Christ, prayed, and then died to make possible.

CONCLUSION

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. It's 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.