

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 1st June 2025 i.e. the seventh Sunday of Easter.

Acts 16

Revelation 22

John 17:20-end

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Chapter seventeen of John's Gospel is often called Jesus' "high-priestly prayer". Since washing his friends' feet in chapter thirteen, Jesus has been teaching them many things; and this is his final word before he is arrested and executed. He wraps up his final sermon with a prayer. Among other things, he asks that even while the disciples remain in a confusing and hostile world the Father would protect them from the evil one [vv. 11, 15]. It's a rich prayer, and it's especially valuable for Christians who have suffered or who are expecting to suffer for their faith.

Today's Gospel reading is the second half of that prayer. Jesus isn't just praying for those who are already with him; he's also praying for those "who will believe ... through [the disciples'] word" [v. 20]. In other words, he's praying for you and me, and for all Christians since that first generation. This final petition is all about unity: he repeats more or less the same phrase three times: asking the Father "that they may all be one...that they may be one as we are one...that they may be completely one." [vv. 21, 22, 23]

It's pretty clear that Jesus wants us to be united: with each other, with him, and with the Father. But if Christian history is anything to go by – to say nothing of our experience of living as Christians today – true unity is difficult to achieve. And to complicate things even more there are a number of other things which are not the same as unity, but which are easily confused with it. We don't stand much chance of being united if what we're aiming for is not actually unity at all. So what is unity, and what is it not? I'm going to look at two things which are not the same as unity but which have often been confused with it; and then I'm going to try to say something positive.

The first thing to notice is that you can be in the same place as another person and not be united with them. Put like that it sounds really obvious, and I'm sure we can all think of people we spend a lot of time with who are not united with us. But you'd be surprised at the number of times we conflate those two things: being in the same place, and being united. Just last week, in fact, if you were in the congregation here at St Mary's, you would have heard the preacher say that a part of

loving someone is “wanting to be with them”. (If you weren’t here last week, you should know that I’m not having a go at someone else: the preacher was me.)

When I said that part of loving someone is “wanting to be with them” I was being a bit simplistic. Jesus' prayer today gives me an opportunity to be a bit more precise: it isn't exactly wanting to be in the same place at the same time that is the loving thing; the truly loving thing is the desire for “union”. And it's possible to separate those two things. I'll give you a few examples.

Very often loving a person does mean wanting physically to be with them. But for lots of reasons love doesn't always work out that way. Maybe, for a time, loving someone means that your heart is in two places: big institutions like governments and the military often demand that of families. When your vocation takes you away from home there are at least two desires competing for attention; and we are often willing to subordinate one desire for a time so we can indulge it later.

There are also times when, on reflection, we have to be apart from someone for their good and for ours. One example is the “empty nest”. Sooner or later a parent has to allow their child (hopefully an adult child) to leave home, to try living independently. And something similar happens at every stage of a child's growth. The protective impulse – which is a form of love – has to give way to a different loving choice: the child needs room to learn for themselves, room to discover their own vocation. Eventually letting the child go becomes a deeper and more wholesome form of love than simply holding on. Less happy is what happens when a relationship breaks down due to abuse or unfaithfulness. At least one party might be at risk of serious physical or emotional harm; and they will need the safety that comes with distance. Even when you've met that initial need for safety the best course of action – and the most loving course of action – may still be to keep as secure a distance between yourself and the other person as possible. I would argue that often the only way to be united with a person who wants to harm you is to keep your distance. So being in the same place is not the same as being united.

The other thing that often gets confused with unity is uniformity. Since the very earliest times - and even more since Christianity got cosy with secular power - Christians have been tempted to use power to iron out disagreements about doctrine and practice. The way Christians arrived at some of the great “ecumenical” agreements, such as the Nicene Creed we'll be reciting in a few minutes, was, in effect, by defining other Christian groups out of the club. There are still groups out there who call themselves Christians, and who would deny the principles that were “agreed” at these famous Church councils. Who are we to say that Jesus wasn't praying for them too?

It didn't have to be that way. The moments of Christian history of which I am most proud are those times when a compromise was reached that embraced difference and that enriched all the parties involved. The mission of Paul and his companions that we've been reading about for the last few weeks in the Acts of the Apostles was the fruit of that sort of agreement. Another example is the settlement reached in this country by Elizabeth the First, establishing the Church of England as we know it today. Elizabeth liked the ancient Greek concept of *adiaphora*: the idea that a national Church might be "indifferent" to things not essential to salvation. Elizabeth said she didn't want to make windows into men's souls. That's why today you can go into some Anglican churches and feel like you might be in a Baptist congregation; in others, you might have stepped through a doorway into St Peter's Basilica. Of course, the Church of England has often failed to be broad enough, as the Roman Catholics and the Baptists and the Quakers and the Methodists will tell you; and we're still systematically excluding certain sorts of Christians today, to our shame. But for me that underlines the importance of the principle: you don't arrive at unity by trying to make everyone do and believe the same thing. Unity embraces difference rather than dissolving it.

So unity is not the same as physical presence; and unity is not the same as uniformity. Being with other people is often good, and it is right that we use the opportunity of being physically present to one another as a time to share the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which is called the sacrament of unity. Likewise, agreement with other people is also often a good thing; we should seek agreement wherever possible, because it makes it possible for us to share other good things like friendship and collaboration. But the temptation to enforce these things as if they were the same as unity ends up being unloving; we frustrate ourselves.

True unity comes from union with God. Jesus says,

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... [John 17:21]

If we are united with God then we will be united with everyone else who is united with God. And God is not limited in the way that we are limited. God is present wherever we are; so our truest union with one another is not restricted by where we happen to be at any given time. In Christ, we can be united with all Christians, throughout time and space. In the same way, as the hymn puts it, "the love of God is broader than the measure of our minds". God is able to be united with those first disciples who never heard of the Book of Common Prayer, and who probably wouldn't have liked it if they did. God is able to be united with Christians who never heard of Nicaea or Chalcedon; those

who never set foot within a church building because the only place they could worship the Son of the Living God was in secrecy: in catacombs; behind locked doors; or alone in their prison cells.

Our union with one another flows out of our union with God. God, who is worshipped not in a single place or in a single way, but in Spirit and in truth [John 4:19-24]. God, who has other sheep who do not belong to this fold; but he will bring them, so there will be one flock and one shepherd [John 10:16].

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.