

Sermon for Sunday 12 May 2024 – The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Sunday after Ascension)

Pete Postle, Reader

Acts 1.15-17,21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5.9-13; John 17.6-19

May all I say and think be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.
Please be seated.

The reading from Acts sees Matthias appointed as the 12th apostle, replacing, of course, Judas the Iscariot. Next Tuesday, the 14th of May, is the Festival Day dedicated related to Matthias. It's also the birthday of my younger brother, may he rest in peace. But onward to the gospel reading. The whole of Chapter 17 of John's gospel, of which you heard a part, is a prayer by Jesus to his Father in heaven, a prayer of self-dedication. It's sometimes called the prayer of consecration or sanctification. There are three main sections to the prayer. The first five verses relate to Jesus and his Father. The middle section, which is what you heard today, relates to Jesus and his disciples. And the last part of the prayer concerns Jesus, his disciples, and the world, the rest of us.

So if you're bothered by that bit you heard today, in today's reading, I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours, fear not; because firstly, the world means this world of sin. This world, whose prince is the devil, I quote Jesus. Secondly, in verse 20 of this same chapter, this same prayer to his Father, Jesus goes on to pray, 'I ask not only on behalf of these, [the disciples], but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one'. Thus, we must address the question of why does Jesus first deliberately single out his disciples in contrast to the rest of humankind? Indeed, in contrast to all that his Father created here on Earth. The same thought had occurred to St Jude. That's the one that John refers to as, 'Judas, not the Iscariot', a short time previously. In chapter 14, verse 22, Jude asks, 'Lord, how is it you reveal yourself to us and not to the world?' To which Jesus responds, 'Those who love me keep my word, and my Father will love them, and he will come to them and make our home with them.' So there's your answer. It's love. But a spiritual love of a nature we can hardly comprehend. If you think about it, what else could it have been? If God was simply all powerful, then he, through Jesus, if he had so decided, could have set about convincing the world by suitably miraculous, powerful displays, which is precisely what an Old Testament God would have done, or would have been expected to do, and precisely what Jesus rejects while meditating in the wilderness.

No, Jesus has been sent by his Father to proclaim a God of love, but the sort of love that isn't adequately decried by any preacher or by any mere exercising of human reasoning power. And indeed, such a love might be difficult to nurture if the seeds aren't already there. But those seeds of real love were there in those disciples. 'They were yours', says Jesus to his Father, 'and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.' So the disciples were handpicked by the hand of God, no less, because somewhere in their souls, their minds, their very being, was the capacity and willingness to hear, recognise, and accept the truth that was Jesus. And they're picked in spite of their little foibles, past, present, and future; such

as, 'Can my sons have a really important place in heaven?' asks the mother of the sons of thunder, James and John. Or, 'I never knew that man, Jesus', Peter, we'll say three times. So despite all such human failings, their souls belong to the Father and the Son, with just the one exception, of course, Judas Iscariot. As Jesus himself points out, but even then he refers to Judas as the one destined to be lost. There's something for you to ponder on.

No less than five times in this one prayer, Jesus says, 'And they had believed me who sent me. So that they', says Jesus, 'no longer belong to the world.' Just like Jesus, and through Jesus, they have learned how to distinguish the selflessness that comes from God from the self-centeredness that's implied by that phrase, 'the world'. But since they are stuck in this world of ours, this world of self-seeking and distrust, they will still have to combat its temptations. So Jesus prays to his Father to support them in their task of witnesses, their task of spreading the gospel out into that inhospitable world. What support does he ask for them? I suppose our instincts would have been a request for strength, courage, and endurance in the face of the difficulties ahead of them. 'Soldiers of Christ, arise and put your armour on', as Charles Wesley would have it. Well, perhaps such fortitude is assumed. But what Jesus asks for them is, 'Father, keep them. Watch over them. In your name, that you've given to me so they may be one as we are one.' And that phrase too, recurs four times in the prayer.

So Jesus's request is for God's care over the disciples and for them to remain unified. Later on in this chapter, he extends that request to his Father, to all of us, that all those who believe in him should also remain united. All things considered, the disciples made a very good job of staying united in their task of spreading the gospel. But what about the rest of us? How do you think we're doing so far? We have the Roman Catholic Church, who I believe would like all other Christians to return to its fold. We have the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has probably remained the closest to the traditions of the fourth and fifth century, but whose Russian and Ukrainian variants are at odds. We have our own Anglican Church, whose leaders are at present desperately trying to hold together a worldwide union threatened by the differing views amongst themselves on gay marriages and homosexuality in general. Pope Francis, last week, speaking at a meeting with the Anglican Primates, 'Only a love that becomes gratuitous service, only the love that Jesus taught and embodies, will bring separated Christians closer to one another. Only that love which does not appeal to the past in order to remain aloof or to point a finger. Only that love which in God's name puts our brothers and sisters before the iron-clad defence of our own religious structures. Only that love will unite us.'

So what we must not confuse is the myriads of differing views of, or the words of a myriad of different church leaders who would refer that we follow their interpretation of what the Bible tells us with the unity that Jesus pray for here. His unity is not a unity of administration or organisation or even dogma. As long as human beings are individuals, they will never organise their churches in the same way or even precisely the same things. Christianity is the unity of personal relationships. It is a unity based upon mutual love, a concern for the well-being of the other person. As such, it can transcend all barriers of faith or anything else you can imagine. For it's no less than desire for the unity of the entire human race.

I'll finish with another quote. This from Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar, extracts from what he preached in 1923 to the Anglo-Catholic Congress. It seemed to be very suitable for the start of Christian Aid Week. 'It is folly, it is madness, to suppose that we can worship Jesus in the sacraments and Jesus on the throne of glory when you are sweating him in the bodies and souls of his children. You've got your mass, you've got your altar, you have begun to get your tabernacle. You go out into the highways and hedges and look for Jesus in the ragged and the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those of lost hope, in those are struggling to make good. Amen.