

John 17:6-19

Jesus prays for His disciples.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. So, (as David/Mandy have said) I'm in my first year of training for ordination, and as part of my training I get teaching sessions on preaching. One thing our lecturer likes to encourage us to do is to see if we can sum up our sermons in a few key words. I'm going to be concentrating on the reading from John 17 this morning, but for both our readings today I think you could summarise them as being about prayer, and about unity.

In John 17 we find Jesus coming to the end of what is known as the Farewell Discourse, which is an account of Jesus's words and actions at the Last Supper. Here Jesus is focusing his revelation on his disciples, preparing them for His imminent departure and encouraging them to have confidence and hope in the face of what will look, though temporarily, like disaster.

As part of that preparation, what we see in chapter 17 verse 6-19 is that Jesus prays for His disciples. If ever we need to be reminded of how important prayer is, then we can find it here, the last thing that the Son of God does before he is arrested and crucified is pray to the Father on behalf of his disciples.

So what does Jesus pray for his disciples? Well, he prays in verse 11, that God will protect them, firstly from the world, but also from the evil one. 'The world' is a reoccurring theme in John and the relationship of Jesus and his disciples to the world is complicated, as we can see in this passage the disciples were chosen from the world (verse 6), they are in the world (verse 11), they are hated by the world (verse 14), but they are not of the world (verses 14, 16). It's important here to pause and just clarify what John means by 'the world'. Often in John 'the world' is shorthand for humanity's enmity with God. The world is still God's good creation, made with Christ and through Christ as we hear in the poetic prologue in John 1, but it is a world in which people will show resistance to God, in which principalities and powers will seek to sow seeds of division, hatred and discord which separate people from each other and from God.

Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world, as God has sent Him, and the disciples are to expect opposition. Jesus is praying that this opposition will not cause the disciples to become separated, not just from God, but also from each other. Jesus prays that the disciples will be

one as he is as one with the Father. Jesus is in a loving and life-giving relationship with the Father, so it is his prayer for the disciples, that they will be one both with God and with each other.

There is something key we need to grasp here. Being at one with each other is of such importance to God's mission in the world that it is Jesus's prayer for His disciples on the eve of His death. To understand this fully we need to read a little further in the chapter to verse 23 where Jesus says the world will know that God has sent Him because the disciples live in unity. The disciples love for one another will be a defiant act in opposition to the way of the world, the inclination of humanity towards division, hatred, discord, and therefore it will be a sign pointing to God, the God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son so that those who believe in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus can be one with God. Dominican Friar and theologian Timothy Radcliffe says, 'If we say that Jesus is risen from the dead but there is no sign of resurrection in our lives, then we can talk about the resurrection until the Kingdom comes, but our words will not mean anything'. The love that the disciples have for each other will be a sign of the power of the resurrection and their actions will speak far louder than their words.

However, you won't need me to tell you that we Christians can be pretty bad at loving each other and very good at dividing. A quick Google told me that there is anything from 33,000 to 45,000 different Christian denominations in the world – yes, we don't even seem to be able to agree on how divided we are! If you're tempted to perhaps think that Jesus's prayer that we should be one is something that applies only to the disciples, then I'm afraid that is not the case. If we read on a little to verse 20, we see that Jesus says he is praying not only on behalf of his disciples, but also for those that will believe in Him through their words and, as we are recipients of those first disciples' testimony, that includes us.

So how then are we to accomplish this seemingly impossible task? Well, we return to Jesus and to prayer. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *A Life Together* says, 'a Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others'.

The happy discovery Bonhoeffer picks up on here is the joy that Jesus prays the disciples will have in verse 13 – so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves, which my bible

notes say can also be translated, joy made complete among themselves. Praying for each other and living in unity will have positive consequences for us as a body of believers, it will bring us the joy of the Lord, but it will also empower us in our mission in the world. As our reading closes, Jesus prays that God the Father will sanctify the disciples. The sense here is that Jesus is asking God to set the disciples apart, not as some sort of pure sect separate from the world, but for the work of ministry, and to embolden and empower them to bear witness to the truth they have received.

So back to our key words of prayer and unity. In order to be one, to nullify the impulse toward division and discord, and in order to spread the truth we have in and through Jesus, we need to pray for each other. And even though it might be difficult, we can do this because we know we are not doing it alone, but that Jesus himself has interceded for us. We can take comfort in knowing that Jesus's prayer remains powerfully effective in our lives today.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you prayed that we might all be one, we pray to you for the unity of all Christians, that by our unity we might show to those who do not know you, the love of the Father. Help us to live in the knowledge and confidence that you are praying for us. Amen.