

**SERMON** *Easter 7 year A Charlbury, 17th May 2026. Judy French*

John 17:1-11

In the Gospel reading Jesus prays his great prayer, 'that they may be one, as we are one'. It's not the easiest bit of Scripture to get your head round, and when you think about how good the church is at being divided on many issues, you have to wonder whether Jesus' prayer was ever actually answered.

It's the night before his crucifixion and death. He's washed the disciples feet, and has been talking to them at length. It's a farewell of sorts, instructions, encouragement, and teaching. Then he prays for himself and for them. Today's passage is the first part of his prayer, and the first thing he asks for is to receive the glory he had with God in the beginning, when 'the Word was with God and the Word was God'. This isn't vanity or an ego trip; Jesus has finished the work the Father gave him on earth and now he asks to return to his place with God.

There's two things about this: one is that the return trip is going to be via betrayal, suffering and the Cross, and the other is that for Jesus the reason he wants the glory is so that he can reveal the Father's own glory. It's about love and self-sacrifice, the self-emptying love that lives for the good of others and not for itself. The whole point of all this is so that people may come to know the Father, the only true God, and have eternal life through Jesus. We often talk about John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, but we sometimes forget that Jesus always pointed to God the Father. It is his intimate relationship with the Father that he wants to share with those who believe he came from God.

The disciples have lived alongside Jesus, they have listened and learned and witnessed the love of God in action. There was clearly a close relationship between Jesus and his friends. What's so lovely about his description of them as he prays is that he sees that they always belonged to God, and God gave them to Jesus. It's almost like being family, there's a strong sense of belonging, so much so that they received all that Jesus had to say about the Father and they believed him. Mind you this is before the betrayals, denials and desertions. Even then, Jesus knows what's going to happen to him and what they're going to do, but he never lets go of the disciples, they are always going to belong to him and to the Father. And as we know, before the Ascension the Risen Jesus spent some time rehabilitating them and re-co-missioning them. Simon son of John do you love me? Feed my sheep, tend my lambs. Make disciples of all nations, baptise them so they too can belong to the family of God.

The problem is that Jesus is no longer in the world, but his followers are. They're going to need all the help they can get. So he prays, 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one'. Protection from what? Persecution? The early church would have valued that part of the prayer, but they were still persecuted and killed, as indeed Christians have been ever since. Jesus called us to take up our cross and follow him, not so we can avoid the difficult stuff but so that we walk with him through it, and not be lost or fall prey to evil. To be protected so that we may be one is a prayer to keep us as God's own beloved, whatever happens. 'Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' It's a powerful prayer.

Protection is one thing, but unity is quite another, as the early church knew all too well. Even when Jesus was still walking the streets with them, they were arguing. Then after he left, they argued about who in could share a meal, whose party represented the 'real' church, whether you were a real Christian if you didn't exhibit certain spiritual gifts, who

the real apostles were, who was in and who was not. Not much seems to have changed. We're still arguing, pretty much about the same things. Does all this contention mean Jesus' prayer for unity has never been answered? That doesn't seem right somehow. Up to now we've believed Jesus, we have seen his glory, he is the Saviour of the world. So are we really saying that we draw the line here? That we don't actually trust that God hears prayers and answers them? That the one person God would definitely not listen to is his own Son? That when Jesus prayed it didn't actually work? Or that maybe God's answer was 'No'. I don't think that is what we are saying, so maybe we need to think differently about what Jesus meant when he prayed that 'they may be one, as we are one'.

Some theologians talk about Jesus being one with the Father in terms of movement - a kind of interweaving action, or a dance between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What if the answer to Jesus's prayer for unity is not about us all solidifying into a huge monolithic block but is rather about a kind of joyful interplay? The clue is in the second part of the prayer - 'may they be one, as we are one'. Unity, not as we think of it, but as God thinks of it. Perhaps the vision is not about total agreement with each other 100% of the time, but the ability to join in the dance of faith together. Maybe this is what Christian unity looks like - a body, as Paul said, with many parts, a dance with many dancers, a song with many voices. The challenge to us is to say yes, there is pain in all this diversity, there are some discordant notes, and sometimes we trip over our own two feet, we are human after all, but can we accept that we are still one community through God's gift and God's grace?

But maybe we find all this action rather dizzying and disorientating. Does our anxiety about conflict and division lure us into settling for something much less satisfactory? With our experience just in the Church of England in recent years over women bishops, safeguarding failures, the fractures over sexuality, it looks like we are a long way from seeing Jesus' prayer that we may be one become a reality. We seem at times to want to sit out this dance. But we believe in Jesus, we trust his words, and like the first disciples, we believe that God sent him to be for us the Way, the Truth and the Life. The disciples Jesus loved, then and now, lived and still live enfolded in his prayer, 'that they may be one, as we are one'. We are not meant to be identical clones in thought and practice, any more than the Three Persons of the Trinity are, in their dynamic interdependence. We are each created in the image of God, with our different gifts and purpose which are part of the whole body of Christ. We belong to God and to one another, our one-ness as Christ's followers is built into the very fabric of our being, whether we like it or not, or rather, whether we like *them* or not. What stops us seeing it is our desire for control, influence and power, we want things our own way, on our own terms, we rather like being in charge and we tend to think it all depends on us. Yes there's plenty we need to work at, but actually it all depends on God. If a life of faith is about anything, it is about learning to peel away these layers of independence and control, and discover again the glory of God, in the self-giving, self-emptying love of the crucified and risen Christ. To become what God has created and called us to be: his beloved children, to love and to serve as Christ has commanded us, to get on our knees and wash feet, and in our turn to reflect his glory and love, to discover that God's own communion of love, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reaches out and embraces all who are called by Christ's name. It is a precious thing that we share with one another, with our friends in Churches Together and with Christians the world over.

This is the love that stays constant, despite the arguments and disagreements, that carries us through suffering and tragedy, that reaches out in times of persecution and

conflict, that offers glimmers of hope and stability in times of confusion and doubt. I can hold on, because I know I love and am loved, and even when my feet slip, as they do from time to time, or when I'm being particularly difficult and argumentative or want my own way, and we find ourselves in a fractured place, getting back on our knees in love and service is a good place to start. Yes, some of the divisions in the Church are complex, and often look unfixable, but remember the ascended Christ still prays for us, God still loves us, and in that all embracing love, we are healed. Thanks be to God. Amen.