

our prayer
a sermon preached on the
seventh sunday of easter
8 May 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Acts 16:16-34, Psalm 97, Revelation 22:12-21, John 17:20-26

It has been said that chapter 17 holds the key to understanding the whole of John's gospel.¹ This "high point of the gospel"² is without doubt a majestic moment, an extraordinary piece of writing, an inspiring and almost luminous conclusion to the five chapters known collectively as the 'Farewell Discourse'.³ Bearing some similarities to the Prologue,⁴ chapter 17 is as rich in its language, as it is profound in its depths. Some might even say that it not only holds the key to understanding John's gospel, perhaps the Christian *evangelion* itself?

Fitting, also, as the gospel on this the last Sunday of Eastertime, as we look with great anticipation to the Pentecostal finale to the entire Lent-Easter cycle. The disciples are going to *have* to do without Jesus⁵ – it is the necessary precondition for "seeing the heavens opened",⁶ for their own completion as sons and daughters of God. Jesus' prayer must become *their* prayer.

In this prayer, we 'overhear' the depth and the nature of Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father – as he prays to the Father within the disciples' earshot, indeed, for their benefit. We hear his longing for God's glory to be revealed,⁷ his plea on behalf of his disciples, that "they may be one, as we are one",⁸ that their joy may be complete,⁹ that they might live in the world though not of it,¹⁰ that they might also be sent into world,¹¹ that others too might come to believe through them, so that "they may all be one",¹² "so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that *they may become completely one.*"¹³

What to do *feel* when you hear Jesus' 'high priestly prayer'?

What is the nature of this one-ness for which Jesus prays? Is it unity of *doctrine* (that every person thinks the same)? Is it *ecclesiastical* unity (for institutional solidarity)? I am convinced that the answer to these questions is an emphatic No. In any case, it is clear that when our attention is fixated on defending dogmatic ideas or on the church as organisational entity, we neither foster one-ness, nor do we embody the love of Jesus.

The unity articulated in Jesus' prayer is unmistakably for *one-ness* of the human with the divine. This has been this evangelist's preoccupation from the very beginning of the gospel. This is John's 'abiding' – the major motif of chapters 14 and 15. It is the unity of the vine and the branches.¹⁴ Those who abide in the vine abide in God – and therefore abide in all things.

This unity is found in understanding God not as an *external* being, but as the *essence*, the very ground of all life: that reality which was in the beginning, through whom all things came into being;¹⁵ whose fullness, completeness, perfection is articulated in the symbol of Revelation's 'Omega';¹⁶ the image of which this very church building bears in its two distinctive transept rose windows.

¹ This is the claim of one of the 20th century's major Johannine scholars, Ernst Kasemann. Cited in John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p202.

² Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John's Gospel*, Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2014, p280.

³ John 13:31-17:26

⁴ See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p745.

⁵ "It is to your advantage that I go away..." John 16:7

⁶ John 1:51

⁷ John 17:1-5

⁸ John 17:12

⁹ John 17:13

¹⁰ John 17:15-16

¹¹ John 17:18

¹² John 17:21

¹³ John 17:22-23

¹⁴ John 15:4-5

¹⁵ John 1:2-3

¹⁶ Revelation 22:13

This conception of God makes all the difference. It's a little like the revolutionary mind-shift from a static cosmos to a dynamic one; from a Newtonian mechanics to an Einsteinian Quantum Mechanics universe. As I said last week, in John's vision God is not 'out there, back there, or up there'. God is not the extra-terrestrial power we attempt to appease in order to get what we want. Rather, God is the essence of all being – the essence of human being, and all life – and we are most human when we abide, when we are 'entangled' (to borrow a term from quantum physics) in God.

And this makes all the difference to how we pray: and how we conduct our mission and ministry.

I mentioned last week the profound difference between the synoptic gospels and John, a function of the evangelist's drinking from the font known as Jewish mysticism. In chapter 17 we see the clearest sign of the influence on John, and his community, of the Wisdom tradition. John's Jesus is in truth Jesus-Sophia, the 'Word made flesh', the one who was loved 'before the foundation of the world',¹⁷ is the very same one who the Lord "created... at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago".¹⁸ Sophia is "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... a reflection of the eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God's goodness".¹⁹ Jesus-Sophia is the pioneer of the enfleshed intimate union of the Divine as imaged in the Holy Trinity.

This union is a profound and deep mystery. As one of the 'Fathers' observed, the union between the persons of the Trinity is mirrored in the interior union within each of the persons individually.

If we think that sounds too fantastic, then it's worth noting that modern science is validating this empirically in our time: demonstrating that the universe is holographic by nature, that the entire universe is contained within even the minutest part, and each minute part containing the entire universe.²⁰

Blessed Julian of Norwich said as much in the 15th century – intuitively, of course – when she famously reflected upon the hazelnut in the palm of her hand, and saw the entire creation in it.²¹

More recently, paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin saw the entire evolution of the universe as a vast process of union, "a synthesis of the material and the physical world with the world of mind and spirit; of the past with the future; and of variety with unity, the many with the one".²²

So we share in the *one* baptism not to make us think the same things – but in order to be grafted into the vine. We share in the *one* Bread and Cup not to make us organisationally unified – but in order to abide in God and God's love, to participate in Jesus-Sophia.

One-ness of the human and the divine: this is centrepiece of Jesus' prayer, the lens through which John explains the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the goal and purpose of the Advocate, the Spirit, the very essence of the meaning of both humankind and the creation. In the sacrament, the entire universe contained within the minutest part, and each minute part containing the entire universe.

This is what Jesus is about. And this is what we are made for: "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them".²³

This is the *Centre* towards which we are invited to return – again and again. When we are thus Centered, all else naturally flows, everything we need is given to us, liberating us from our frantic, anxious, self-serving schemes²⁴ – which means that all peripheral and superficial and secondary matters fall into their proper perspective.

The prayer of chapter 17 is to be *our* prayer! May others come to 'see Jesus', because they see us focussed not on the trite or superficial, but deeply resting in and focussed on the Centre – which is the essence of what happens when as one body we encircle the altar of bread and wine.

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¹⁷ John 17:24

¹⁸ Proverbs 8:22

¹⁹ Wisdom of Solomon 7:25,26

²⁰ see Judy Cannato, **Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and Other Wonders of the Universe**, Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2006, pp94-102.

²¹ Julian of Norwich (Edmund Colledge trans.), **Showings**, New York: Paulist Press, 1978,p183

²² Sir Julian Huxley's introduction to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (trans. Bernard Wall), **The Phenomenon of Man**, London: Collins, 1965, p11.

²³ John 17:26

²⁴ Acts 16:16,19