John 17 1-25 30.7.23 Linda Cawsey

We’re listening in to Jesus talking to his father. We know that Jesus had a rich prayer life but we have hardly any of his prayers, most of them just short sentences but this is a longer prayer (3 minutes) and yet in that prayer he has poured out his whole soul. He only asks for 3 things and they’re not the kind of things that people ask for. This is the Lord’s prayer. What we call the Lord’s prayer is not the prayer he would ever pray. Forgive us our trespasses would have been totally inappropriate for the son of God. This is the prayer that only the Lord could pray. And he asks for 3 things - that he himself may be glorified in what is to come in the next 24 hours – secondly he entrusts his 11 disciples to God’s keeping and asks that they be set apart for the work they have to do and – and thirdly (as Eugene Petersen writes in The Message) that all believers everywhere may be of one heart and mind.

Let’s put this prayer in its setting – about midnight and the day has come in which he will die so this is the prayer of a condemned man on his last morning. From previous chapters we know Jesus and his disciples are about to make their way from the upper room to Gethsemane passing the temple area the place where the high priest offered sacrifices for the people and here is the greatest high priest of them all praying. Once a year on the day of atonement we read in Leviticus 16 the high priest would go into the temple and he would offer 3 prayers – for himself, his fellow priests and all the people of God and then having offered those 3 prayers he would come out and kill the sacrifice on the day of atonement. It seems as though Jesus is almost deliberately taking over the position of the high priest. He’s offering the three prayers for himself, his immediate helpers and colleagues and all the people of God. The only difference is that instead of going from that prayer to kill an animal he’s going to provide himself as the sacrifice.

3 requests. First is real surprise. No-one would ever dare to pray this. I am sure you have never prayed God give glory to me. But only the Son of God could pray this and he goes on to show this isn’t a selfish request because he goes on to say ‘give glory to me so that I can give more to you’. And it was appropriate because for 33 years his glory had been hidden. ‘Mild he lays his glory by born that man no more may die.’ When Jesus came to earth, he left his glory behind. All that people could see was the village carpenter, or a little baby or a boy growing up or a wandering preacher. The glory was not there.

Only once in his lifetime had the disciples caught a glimpse of his glory as it really was before he came to earth and it was so bright Peter says it was brighter than the midday sun. Now Jesus says, Lord give me the glory I used to have. And God gave him that glory. A few months later a man saw that glory and was blinded by it – his name was Saul. But he’s asking for something more. He’s asking for glory in his death. Crucifixion is not only a painful death. It is designed to be a humiliating death. Strung up naked for everyone to see and throw things at you and mock. Jesus says Father the hour has come. You take this horrible disgrace, this humiliating act and glorify me. And God answered his prayer.

When you see a picture of Jesus on the cross – are you ashamed of him; do you see humiliation. You will see his pain and suffering but do you feel humiliated. Often when people draw Jesus on the cross they draw a circle around his head – the circle of glory. Glorify me now, the hour has come, all the 33 years are now coming to a climax and men are going to humiliate me and bring me down – but not only has the cross led to the resurrection and life of Jesus, it is by the glory of the cross that eternal life has been given to so many others. It took a hardened Roman centurion witnessing the death on the cross to exclaim ‘Surely this was the Son of God’. What could have been a tragedy has become a triumph and what could have taken him right to the bottom has lifted him up. God answered the first part of His prayer.

The second petition. He turns now to the men around him. There aren’t many – only 11. Jesus was given 11 and it was from those 11 that the church sprung. Jesus thinks of those 11 and he tells God two things about them. Jesus informs God firstly what he Jesus has done for them and secondly what they have done for him. He says I have introduced them to you. They now know you, I have given them your words, your message so they now know you. That is what Jesus does for us and nobody else can. No man comes to the father except through the son. He introduces us to God the Father. Jesus says, I have given them your words so they now know you.

What have they done for him? Jesus says they have received the word, they have believed it and they have obeyed it. They have come to knowledge through receiving, believing and obeying. These are the ways in which the word of God gets right into your heart. Hearing, receiving, believing and obeying and then we will know God. Then he makes an amazing statement – I am not praying for the world. Surely God loves the world so why would Jesus not pray for the world. Why did he deliberately say I am not praying for the world I am praying for these 11 men. The best thing you can do for the world is to pray for God’s people in it. Although Jesus had love and compassion for the world, he said I am going to focus in on those who are going to go to the world. Now the reason for the prayer. Jesus is going to leave them. He’s going back out of the world and he’s leaving them in it and that is concerning because the world is a very dangerous place. Another 24 hours and Jesus will be free from all the pressures and temptations of the world but his followers will still be there. It will be some years before they go to glory and Jesus is concerned about them. How are they going to manage by themselves?

So Jesus prays Lord I’ve kept them until now, now you take over. While I was with them in the world I kept them, I protected them and the word ‘keep’ is a lovely word. A castle would have a keep and that’s the same word. It means to protect, to make a little fortress of someone, to put them behind a high wall, to keep them safe. I’ve kept them says Jesus and what a battle it had been but he had kept them. In those 3 years every one of them could have gone. Jesus was honest in his prayer. He says Father there was one I didn’t manage to keep. But I know now that I was never meant to keep him that he never belonged to you so he never really belonged to me but of the rest – all these 11 I’ve kept them but now I am going to leave them so Father you keep them now.

Jesus says, for their sakes I set myself apart not just from evil but for good. The world is an evil place and Jesus knows that evil is personal. Lord I don’t want these people out of the world. They’re not to become hermits, not to withdraw from the world. You don’t have to withdraw into a monastery in order to withdraw. You can withdraw into Christian communities. It’s ten times easier to be a Christian in a Christian conference or at Christian meetings than to go to the office or shop and be a Christian there. Ten times easier to be a Christian in a nice Christian atmosphere. But Jesus said I don’t want them out of the world, I want them right in it. I’m not praying that you should take them out of it. I’m praying they should be right in it. That’s where we’re to be – right involved in human society, rubbing shoulders with everybody except one person and that’s the evil one – so the Lord prays that they’re kept from one person and not from anybody else. Lord I’m not asking you to take them away from people. Lord, I’m asking you to take them away from one person and then it’ll be all right. They’ve got a job to do. I’m not praying that they be taken out of the world – I’m sending them in just as you sent me into the world.

That’s the lovely part of our Christian faith. No other religion says that God sent his own son into our world and he had to come and face all the temptations, all the misunderstandings, all the slander, all the criticism. He had to face all that and if a Christian goes into the world, they’ll have to face all that. Jesus would have nothing to do with the evil one but he mixed with everyone else so much so they called him the friend of sinners. He went to places some Christians wouldn’t go to today. He mixed with people some church people wouldn’t talk to. That’s what Jesus did and so he says I’m sending them as you sent me. They’ve got a job to do in the world so I’m praying for their sanctification that they may be set apart from the evil one and set apart for Your use.

Now we come to the third part of this prayer and here we are St. Andrew’s Canterbury in v 20. A much larger circle, on through time and into the 21st century. Jesus can now see in vision millions of people coming to him because of the apostles’ word and here we have in our hands the apostles’ message and it’s through this message that you come to believe in Jesus. Jesus faith in these disciples is very touching. He never said I wonder if these 11 will be able to win anybody. He never said I hope they’ll be successful in their mission. He just said Father I pray for those who are going to come. They were just ordinary men, full of weakness. They were going to run away from him in a few hours and yet he said Father I thank you for those who are going to come – and believed it.

Now what is our Lord’s concern for all believers down through the ages? You can sum it up so simply in one word – unity. A few years ago church people were fed up with hearing John 17 v20 when ecumenical unity was talked about ‘that they all may be one as we are one so that they may be brought to complete unity’. But the question is whether unity may not have been confused with uniformity or union. What was attempted was to organise unity among Christians. We’ve learnt the hard way that you can’t organise unity. It’s so sad that we all use different labels but that’s not the biggest offence. Nor do people look closely at the label outside a church if they can find God inside. There’s a much deeper thing than that. Organised unity can’t be done.

So what is this unity for which our Lord prayed. Is it uniformity (no), is it union (no). David Pawson suggests it is unanimity. Hearts and minds and wills that act alike spontaneously.

That’s how Jesus was one with the Father. He says I want them to be one as you and I are one. Jesus and His father had a harmony of heart and mind and will that whether they were together or apart they acted the same. When a group of Christians have the same heart and mind, you feel the same love and hear the same thing. It doesn’t matter who’s deciding the policy, the will of the Holy Spirit is apparent to all. That’s unanimity. At the very deepest level that’s what Jesus had with the Father. It was not visible because no one could see the unity between Father and son but they could feel the results of it in his words and deeds that the Father was present.

There are those who would say that this part of Jesus’ prayer hasn’t been answered. Jesus was glorified and the apostles were sanctified. Some would talk as though **we** must answer this prayer but he wasn’t praying for us to do it. He did tell us to love one another but in this prayer he’s praying that God would do it. And down through the ages it has been done and it is being done. Wherever there are people who have come through the first part of this prayer – they believe in Jesus as the Son of God and they believe the gospel message, then they enjoy the unity at the end of it. Wherever there are those who allow the glory of Jesus to shine in their lives and wherever there are those who are set apart from sin and set apart for good and accept the word of God as truth you find that God creates a unity of spirit. Regardless of denominational label.

So really the third prayer is conditional on the first and the second. Show me a group of Christians in which the glory of Jesus is shown, that have severed themselves from evil and are usable in God’s service and accept the word of God is truth and they will be a group of Christians that are thinking and feeling and acting alike. It happens when Jesus is glorified and the word of God is believed and the Spirit has sanctified, then the prayer of Jesus is answered. There is nothing that convinces the world more that Jesus is the Son of God and that God loves them than to see people of different background, temperament and label working together and worshipping together and in unity. They’re not trying to organise unity, they are one and that takes away all the arguments - they just see that Jesus is the Son of God, that God did send him and He died for our sins and that he loves us. For where else could we get such love. We’re not capable of it ourselves - that they may know that you love them as you love me.

Finally, Jesus says I’m not only looking forward to this unity on earth but also in heaven. It’s not just a unity on earth but Jesus looks forward to a unity in heaven.

He finishes up where he began. The world does not know you but these know you. That’s the difference. That line goes right through human society. You either do know God personally or you don’t. It’s not whether you believe in God but it’s whether you know God and then you will start to know the will of the Father in your life. The world will talk about God, they’ll talk about religion but they don’t know God. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. That’s of course why the world lacks love and lacks joy. Because they don’t know God.

In summary then - Jesus has prayed this prayer that the glory of the Son of God may be seen in his followers, that we may be of one heart and mind with the Father and the Son, that we may be in the world but separated and protected from the evil one and that one day we may be with him where he is.