

## Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

24<sup>th</sup> of May 2009

### John 17:6-19

It is very late in the evening. The meal is long over. Earlier, as the meal ended, Jesus had knelt and washed his disciples' feet. He then began to prepare them for life without him. He gave them the new commandment, that they love one another. He prepared them for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. He shared with them the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son. And he spoke of his betrayal and death. He gave them his final teachings, the wisdom that they would hold onto during the horrors of his crucifixion and the overwhelming joy and shock of his resurrection.

Now, Jesus turns from the disciples to his Father. The disciples become involuntary eavesdroppers on a prayer of communion, on an intimate meeting between the Father and the Son. But *because* they are listening, this prayer of communion is also a prayer of revelation. In this prayer the theological heart of the Gospel of John is revealed.

Today we are also eavesdroppers. We are in the same position as Jesus' first disciples, overhearing a private conversation, and learning from our eavesdropping who God is and who we are.

The prayer that we overhear shows the unity of the Father and the Son. This prayer is a moment of unique intimacy, in which Jesus is praying as the divine Son. Jesus' knowledge of the Father gives him an immediate experience of God; Jesus is face to face with the God to whom he prays. The will of the Father and the will of the Son are one, so Jesus' prayer is more of relationship than request. Jesus can make petitions in the complete confidence that they will be granted, because what the Son asks, the Father wants to give. They are one.

This is an unusual position for a petitioner to be in. Most of us, those of us who are not saints or mystics, see God in a mirror, dimly. We do not yet see God face to face. And so when we pray there is always an unspoken caveat: "Not my will, but yours, be done". We do not know the mind of God. But Jesus does. Who is Jesus in the Gospel of John? He is the only Son of the Father; he is in the Father and the Father is in him; on earth he did the work that the Father gave him to do. The core of that strange Christian concept, the Trinity, is here, in the union revealed in this overheard prayer.

Jesus is also the one who has glorified the Father and will be glorified by him. Jesus has glorified God on earth by revealing Him to the disciples. His completion of the task is shown by the small group that surrounds him as he prays, the disciples to whom he has made God's name known. They now know God intimately, they know God by name. This nature of God that is revealed is seen in the Son. Father and Son are one. Jesus reveals in his own life and death and through his teachings that the nature of God is love. Throughout the Farewell Discourse Jesus talks a lot about love. Love is the new commandment; love is what he calls his disciples to. In the crucifixion that will take place on the day after this meal, Jesus makes that love, God's love, manifest. God is now known by name, and as Charles Wesley said: "thy nature and thy name are love".

Jesus asks that his Father protect his disciples in the Father's name. Jesus is leaving the world, and he is leaving his disciples in the world. They will need God's protection. The term 'world' is used in different ways in the Gospel of John. In what is possibly the single most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, the world is what Jesus came for: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son". But here the 'world' is not what Jesus came to save. 'World' does not mean the earth, this beautiful and fragile planet. And 'world' does not mean creation, which God called good. In this prayer the 'world' is the realm that doesn't acknowledge God. The 'world' is what is going to kill Jesus on the cross. This is

the 'world' in which Jesus is leaving the disciples. It will hate the disciples, just as it hated Jesus, because by living out the commandment of love, by living in relationship with the Father and the Son, and by following Jesus' example, the disciples will challenge the values and practices of the world. They will show that there is another way: a way of peace in a world of war; a way of love in a world of hate, a way of community in a world of competition. They will be trouble-makers in the eyes of the world. The 'world' will not like that.

But as the disciples overhear, they are not being left alone. Throughout the Farewell Discourse Jesus has talked about the Holy Spirit, who will come when he leaves, and next week we will celebrate the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. And in this prayer, the disciples hear themselves commended to the Father by the Son, The incarnate Jesus may be leaving the world, but the Triune God will never leave them alone.

The prayer of Jesus is as much for us as it was for the disciples who overheard it. Later in his prayer, he says that, "I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they might be one". That is us. Two thousand years later we are as much the subjects of Jesus' prayer as the people who reclined with him at supper. We, like them, have been commended to God by Jesus. Jesus has asked that we, like them, be protected by God. We, like them, belong to the Father and the Son. And so we, like them, have a role to play in the glorification of Jesus. It is through our knowledge of the only true God and of Jesus Christ, through our sharing of that knowledge, and through our unity, that Jesus will be glorified in us.

Today we remember the Wesley brothers, who shared the message of God's love with those that the established Church despised, and demanded that they methodically live holy lives. Today is also the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when we join with Jesus' prayer that we may be one as the Father and the Son are one. Through our relationship with the Trinity, we are also in relationship with every other Christian. Unity doesn't mean agreement, or uniformity. It does mean that we can live together with joy and love despite our differences of race and gender and class and sexuality and everything else that divides people in the 'world'. We might even model to the 'world' how different people can live together in justice and peace. Through our relationship with Jesus we are drawn closer to the Father, and the closer we are to God, the closer we are to each other. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity seeks to make this closeness visible.

Today, May the 24<sup>th</sup>, we celebrate the Wesleys. In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we remember everyone who has worked for the unity of the Church. In today's gospel reading we hear Jesus praise the disciples who are his own, the ones God gave him, who have received his word. These people, sent into the world by God, did great things. But it's not enough to remember and celebrate them. We have also been sent by God. We, too, are sent into the world, in the footsteps of the first disciples, the ecumenists, the reformers, to share the message of the name of God with the world. It is possible that the world will hate us for it, but Jesus promises that it will make our joy complete. Thanks be to God. Amen.