

Sermon: John 17:1-26

Unity of the Believers

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In our prayers here in church we often pray for the other churches in Egypt, not only for our own brand of the christian faith. We pray for the Roman Catholics, for the Coptic Orthodox, for Presbyterians as we recognise them all as followers of our Lord.

But how in the world can we all claim to follow Jesus Christ, even recognise others as followers of Him, and still be so badly divided?

1 Context of call for unity

In Jesus' prayer in John 17, he prayed for the unity of those who believe in Him - that includes us. In his prayer we come across some central reasons why this unity is so important.

First, those who follow Jesus need to be one because they are in the world, and because they need protection from the evil one.

Jesus prayed that God would protect his disciples from the attacks of the Evil One. The Bible is not a speculative book; it does not discuss the origins of evil; but it is quite certain that in this world there is a power of evil which is in opposition to the power of God and that is out to destroy us.

It is uplifting to feel that God is like a powerful soldier who stands over our lives to guard us from the assaults of evil. How does he do this? Well, Jesus prayed for us - and he still prays for us. But how does guard us?

God uses means for guarding us, and the unity of christians is one of God's main methods to help us in the midst of the problems we face in this world.

St Peter, in the letter we read from, writes about the those troubles. Peter points to the organic unity of all christians as a source of comfort. Knowing the suffering of other people makes us less surprised about our own pain.

And Peter underlines that we suffer for a specific reason - we are part of the community that belongs to Jesus Christ. As he suffered, so his church suffers, and if we do this together, we are able to help those with shaky knees.

And sometimes we are weak and need to be helped by others to continue on through life and to hold on to our faith.

Unity of the church is, therefore, a sort of defence mechanism as it help us together to face our problems. If I have a problem, you help me. If you suffer from anything, I will stand beside you. If one stumbles, the other helps him up.

But church unity is not only a defence mechanism; Jesus also mentions the unity of the church as a positive force in the mission of the church.

The world will believe that Jesus was sent by God if the followers of Jesus are united. Earlier, in John 13:35, Jesus had said something similar. Love one another, and by this, all men will know that you are my disciples.

When we as followers of Jesus are one, the church is an attractive sign raised up for the nations to see, inviting all to believe in Christ as sent by God to save all men. As the place where we find God.

2 Basis on our unity

The reason why the unity of Christians has so much impact, is that it is a direct reflection of who God is. Jesus prays that we are one, even as He and His Father are one.

The Oneness of the believers has its model and its root in the unity of the Holy Trinity . The source from which the unity of the Church flows is the intimate unity of the Three Divine Persons among whom there is mutual love, peace, and joy.

The unity of the Church is practically speaking created by our Lord Jesus Christ who drew us all to Him, and who connect us to each.

This prayer of Jesus for unity was initially wonderfully fulfilled. The apostles were one; they sometimes had their frictions and their disagreements, honestly described in their letters. But they were able to maintain their unity around Jesus Christ.

But when we look at the state of the church today, this prayer of Jesus should make us think very deep and scratch our head. What we have done, for heavens sake, and what we can do! Had we together stuck more to apostolic teaching, could we not have avoided our evil divisions?

St Cyprian from Carthage said in the 3rd century,

It may be evident how greatly someone sins who divides unity and peace, since even the Lord himself asked for this same thing. [...] Discord cannot come into the kingdom of God." [The Lords prayer, 30]

3 Character of unity

I used some bible commentaries about Jesus' prayer for our unity, and I found it almost entertaining to see how protestant commentaries tend to stress that this unity is not about denominational unity.

The unity Jesus prays for "is more than being fellow members of an ecclesiastical organisation", is what I came across much. Are we trying to suggest that our denominational divisions are not as bad as they are?

I agree that Jesus meant more than being fellow members of one church organisation, but that does not mean he meant less. It is much better to admit that as churches we have messed up.

Our divisions as churches is a sin. Jesus wanted us to be one, and we are not. The only way we can wash our hands in innocence is by pretending that all denominations beside our own, are not really the body of Christ. As soon as we admit that they are part of the body of Christ, how can we as churches be so divided and sometimes even work against each other?

I read in one commentary [William Hendriksen, John, p. 357]:

Jesus was not requesting that some day all denominations may become one mammoth-denomination (however excellent church-union may be when it can be achieved without sacrificing any basic principle).

Is this true? Is church-union less important than our 'basic principles'? Should church unity not be seen as one of the major basis principles in itself?

The same author wrote,

Believers should always yearn for peace, but never peace at the expense of the truth, for 'unity' which has been gained by means of such sacrifice is not worthy the name.

This is hard to disagree with, but at the same time - how sure are we of our own truth? And are the relatively small differences important enough to keep us separate?

When I came to live in Egypt 26 years ago, I came with my strong evangelical- protestant convictions. For me, my type of church was the true expression of the Christian faith. Now, somewhat wiser and much older, I have given up on this exclusivity. When I meet my Coptic Orthodox or Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, I meet fellow believers. How can we live our christian lives apart from each other, rejecting each other?

The union between Jesus and God was one of mutual love and obedience. When Jesus prayed for our unity, it was a unity of love for which He prayed, a unity in which men and women love each other because they loved Him, and because they see this love inside the Trinity.

You and I may not be able to have much impact on our large church divisions. But we all have a responsibility in our own environment.

It is our individual duty to demonstrate the unity of love with each other and with our fellow Christians; that is at least a partial response to Christ's prayer.

But sadly, It seems more natural for us to be divided than to be united. It is more human for us to fly apart than to come together.

Cyril of Alexandria points us the way in his Commentary on the Gospel of John:

"Christ wants the disciples to be kept in a state of unity by maintaining a likemindedness and an identity of will [...] in the law of peace and love for each other.

It is not by nature that we are one and that we love one another, it needs our will and the work of God's Spirit in us. By nature we create many obstacles as we are different, with different cultures, views, lifestyles. We have, as churches, even been able to develop different theologies.

We need the will to love each other; the decision to do so. Love is the cement that keeps our community together. It is that bond of peace, mutual respect, kindness, care for each other that we all need so much - and that is so convincing for a world that suffers from disunity.

The unity of the church is not supposed to be similarity, by the way. Jesus does not pray for us to be all similar products on a conveyor belt. Our unity is a unity in diversity. Just as God is three-in-one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; they are not similar - but they are one.

The christian view of the Trinity is important for us, both for us personally, and for the church, and for our societies. It teaches us that real unity does not need absolute similarity. In the church we desire to be one, but do not expect others to be like you.

Also, do not try to be like someone else. Be yourself. Be your unique self. That is your best contribution to this world, and to our church. Do not be ashamed of being different. That is enjoyable, just as inside God, there is diversity. This makes you stronger - and it makes the community stronger.

But having said this, the reality is that we all struggle with disunity everywhere. As Christians we know quite well how to war against each other. In our families we sometimes fight out small scale wars.

And this should not surprise us; even the New Testament is full of examples of followers of Jesus who found it hard to maintain this unity. We read of factions, groups, internal disagreements; we see how Jewish followers of Jesus refused to eat with pagan followers of our Lord.

Christians will never be able to organise their Churches all in the same way. They will never worship God all in the same way. They will never all believe precisely the same things. But Christian unity transcends all these differences and joins men together in love.

But our efforts again and again, to come together again, to talk, to not give up on each other, that shows that we understand the need for reconciliation; it shows our desire to follow our Lord. It shows we desire the welfare of our communities. It is our concrete response to Jesus' prayer for unity.

And even this is attractive to people around us. How do we deal with conflicts. How do we maintain relationships even if they are strained. How do we practice unity while we are very different.

If love and a serious effort to be one community are held up high, we will usually be able to sort out our differences. Differences can be painful, but the pain can be overcome. And when we overcome those problems, we truly go in the footsteps of our Lord who came to bring God and mankind in community together, and to bring men and women together in the one body of our Lord.

Conclusion

In celebrating Holy Communion we express our unity, by eating of the same bread and drinking from the one cup. By focusing on Jesus Christ, even kneeling together, we underline that we are one and equal for God and for each other.

And we do this with all Christians, in all countries, in all denominations. Let us express this unity in Christ in love and by seeking more visible unity. How can we do less, as we are all connected to our Lord and we are one family of God.