

Easter 7 A May 4, 2008: Wesley 9 & 10:30am Acts 1. 6-14 & John 17. 1-11 Revd Peter Walker

In the ancient world a persons last words were always regarded as very special. And so it was customary, in portraying someone's life, for a biographer to crystallize the essence of their message, the most important things for future generations to know, in an account of their subjects last words - and sometimes their final prayer.

Chapter 13 through to chapter 16 of John's Gospel are the last words of Jesus to his disciples. The 17th chapter is Jesus' final prayer. The prayer is very beautiful. It says: " we can trust that if we have seen Jesus we have seen God " we can trust that God is compassion and love, and holds a unique place for us " we can trust that meaning for life is found by sharing God's compassion and love in the world " we can trust that eternal life is not some sort of 'certificate of acquittal' but is a relationship of love and obedience with God which leads us to love one another.

John has a wonderful way of bringing everything into focus because he has followed this protocol of ancient biography. We know that, being written perhaps 60 years after Jesus' death we do not have here a direct account, word for word, from the mouth of Jesus. But we have what John's community considered the essence of the Lord's teaching.

There are two matters of deep significance addressed in the prayer, Christian unity and eternal life, and it is interesting the way they seem to be linked. Unity is not a strategy of convenience for the churches. It is not a way of economising our effort and resources. Unity with other believers has about it, according to the prayer of Jesus, the quality of eternal life.

Christianity has been plagued by the tendency to turn the concept of eternal life into a commodity that is earned as a reward - a cheque that is paid to our favour in the life to come. John's theology here is a very effective antidote to that.

For John, unity and eternal life are inseparable. He holds before us two pillars of our faith and seems to be saying that one will not be found without the other: eternal life is communion with God and with each other a unity that may be experienced and enjoyed in the here and now. Living in relationship with God and each other is to share now in the blessings of the life to come. It is a sign of the way that our future intrudes into the present. As people of faith, our unity, which doesn't mean we always agree with or like each other!, should be our joy in the present and our hope for the future...and it is Christ's prayer for us.

We some times speak of the church as a witness to Christ's better way. Over 100 million people perished in conflicts in the 20th century, with much of that conflict being inspired by religious intolerance. If the Church cannot be a witness to a better way, the way of harmony and peace and unity, then who will? St Augustine said: Begin the work of peace within yourself, for then you will be able to bring peace to others

This morning's reading from The Acts of the Apostles also portrays a scene in which Jesus offers parting words. The disciples want to know when Jesus will restore the kingdom of Israel to power and glory. And Jesus responds that their task is not to wait there, expecting his immanent return, holding hopes of glory and power. Their task is to go into the world and be his witnesses.

The scene as set by Luke, the author of Acts, even has angels (or the word can also be rendered 'messengers') come to the huddled followers and saying: Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up - he will come again. Don't worry that he won't find you, for he will. Move on from this place! Take up his calling, and go out into the world.

Sometimes the church is rather good at standing in a (metaphorical) huddle, with our eyes stuck on the heavens. But Luke's messengers also come to tell us that we must get our eyes back down to earth. Witnesses are no use if they are not in the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: Not in the flight of ideas but only in action is freedom. Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living. God's command is enough and your faith in him to sustain you. Then at last freedom will welcome your spirit amid great rejoicing.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, kept a diary and, after his early death, it was published. Called "Markings" it is still reprinted today and called a 'Spiritual Classic'. He wrote in 1955: The mystical experience. Always here and now - in that freedom which is one with distance, in that stillness which is born of silence. But - this is a freedom in the midst of action, a stillness in the midst of other human beings. The mystery is a constant reality to [him] who, in this world, is free from self-concern, a reality that grows more peaceful and mature. In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.

There we have it, three themes for our ongoing prayer and action: " Unity and Eternal Life " Witness given upon the earth to the one we will worship in heaven " Holiness being found through Action

It is no coincidence that the lectionary asks us this week to read the prayer of Jesus in John 17 and his command in Acts 1 that we be his witnesses in the world. This is "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" invites us to reflect on Jesus' hope for us - his hope for our unity, and his hope that we will be committed to a greater unity with other Christians, reaching beyond allegiance to names or traditions.

Let us close in prayer:

Eternal God, keep your church in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace; that we might witness to your love in the world and share in the blessing of eternal life. Amen.