

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, CANBERRA
SUNDAY, 22 JUNE 2008
31ST. ANNIVERSARY, INAUGURATION, UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA
9 AM and 10.30 AM

Readings: Ezekiel: 15 – 28

Psalm 122

Hebrews 13: 1 – 8

John 17: 20 – 26

Text: John 17: 21a: "...that the world may believe that you have sent me".

The Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated on this day, 31 years ago, on 22nd. June 1977. The first Synod papers after the Inauguration had a photograph of the service on their front covers, and under the photographs this phrase was printed: "... that the world may believe that you have sent me". So, at its beginning our Church understood itself in terms of these words, as part of these seven verses from John's Gospel.

In this passage from John, we need to note **four** things:

1. This prayer is part of his "Farewell Message". As such, it sums up Jesus' life and his ministry. It follows an Old Testament tradition. Moses' farewell speech in Deuteronomy concludes with a hymn of praise to God and Moses' blessing of the Israelites (Deuteronomy 33). Many of the farewell speeches of other Israelite leaders and prophets end with a prayer. Indeed, this form was well documented in the religious literature of the ancient Mediterranean world and would have been familiar to the first readers and hearers of the gospel. However, it is not just the discourse of one about to die. It is about the climax of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and ascension into heaven. The prayer is not a death-bed prayer. It is the prayer of One who is about to lay down his life for the world so that God's work may be achieved through him. Jesus is the one who intercedes for us on the brink of death but who has the absolute certainty of ultimate victory.

2. It is a prayer of Jesus, his so-called “High Priestly Prayer”. Jesus prays to the Father on his own behalf, and on behalf of all of those who are to follow him. The prayer reflects the relationship between the Father and Jesus, and it is into this oneness with him and with the Father that he wishes to bring his followers. Jesus prays for himself, for the disciples and for the church of the future, that they may experience oneness with him and the Father.

This prayer is the symbol of our worship, whether that worship is what happens on Sunday morning or the service of our lives. We pray in worship, “through Jesus Christ, our Lord”. That is because we have as humans no idea what to do, unless we are caught up by Christ into his worship of the Father.

3. The prayer is eschatological. It redefines time. The perspective of the prayer is governed by the eschatological reality of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The past, present and future are all brought together in one moment. In this prayer we can see Jesus as already crucified, already risen and already with us through the Holy Spirit, praying for us both immediately before his crucifixion and in the here and now.

4. It refers to “Glory”. What does this glorification mean? In John it refers primarily to Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. “Glory”, “δοξα” (*doxa*), is the translation of the Hebrew “*shekinah*”, “presence”, the point at which we see the very presence of God. Through his death and resurrection, God’s glory, God’s very presence, is extended to the lives of the believing community. His love changes the lives of those who believe in him and who continue his work in the world.

It is in the context of these **four factors** that we need to understand Jesus’ sense of two things:

1. The church’s unity

2. The call to mission.

Let us look at them both, as they both lie at the heart of the Uniting Church, whose anniversary we celebrate today.

1. The church’s unity. Here, unity is not the ultimate goal of the church, but the penultimate goal, which is that the world may believe. The unity of Christians is so that the world may believe. Jesus’ immediate concern is to prevent a split between Jews and Christians. He is concerned that they will all believe in him as Messiah. It is his hope that Christianity will become the New Israel. The desire of Jesus is that the community will experience the oneness, the mutuality and the reciprocity of him and the Father. Christian unity is a result of the character and identity of God revealed to the community through Jesus’ suffering and death. It will be an expression of the completion of God’s work through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. Christian unity is to be both a reflection and a sign and symbol of the

love of God, and an expression of that love when it is lived out in the world. So we are called to continue our search for unity, in all its various ways. Commercial competition may be the best way to provide goods and services at the lowest possible price, and in the most efficient way. But competition between Churches or congregations or parishes is not to be the way of Christianity. In John's terms, the idea of a divided church is preposterous. In Lesslie Newbigin's terms, it is like a temperance society in which all the members are permanently drunk. This is one of the great gifts to which the Uniting Church has been called.

2. The call to mission. In this prayer Jesus prays for the unity of the church across time for the sake of the evangelisation of the world. He is praying for those in any generation who believe and those who do not believe but who may come to believe on account of the witness of the church. In verses 20 - 23 Jesus turns his attention to the world that it will come to share in the knowledge and love of God. Jesus prays that the world will come to believe what the faith community already believes, that Jesus is the one whom God has sent. So Christian mission must always point to Christ, and not to itself. It is an act of love, of spontaneous joy, of uncalculating grace, in the confidence of Christ who calls us forward. This is a founding call to the Uniting Church, as to Christianity itself.

James Haire