

Easter 7 – 9am Wesley – 8<sup>th</sup> May 2016

Theme: 'Several aspects of Prayer'

Reading: John 17:20-26 'Part of Jesus' prayer before his arrest'

Text: "My prayer is not for them alone (that is the disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one."

John 17: 20,21a

### Introduction

There is a catchy saying that goes like this: 'Be careful what you pray for; you may just get it!' In the light of today's Gospel from John 17 I'd like to rephrase that catchy saying:

"Be careful what you pray for because what you pray for is a good indication of what you believe and how you live your faith."

For instance, in many congregations there is a point at which the minister/worship leader calls for prayer requests and what follows are requests for healing for a series of maladies within the congregation. If you were a new person seeking to follow Jesus you would think Jesus was purely a healer/miracle worker. Certainly this is one aspect of intercessory prayer but there is far more to prayer than this. Hence later in the service when I ask for prayer points, I want us to think about what we are asking for, why we are asking and how our prayer points are a reflection of our faith!

### The Gospel for today – John 17:20-26

We need to remember the setting of today's Gospel as well as the context of this section of Jesus' prayer.

The setting is just prior to his arrest, trial and crucifixion. It is part of the longest discourse of Jesus and if you have one of those Bibles that have the words of Jesus printed in red you would see that John chapters 14-17 are the longest section of teaching by Jesus in the Gospels.

John 17 is called a 'priestly prayer' because in this chapter Jesus intercedes for others before God, as a priest would do in the Hebrew Scriptures. This priestly role has continued in the orthodox traditions and less so in the protestant, reformed traditions.

John 17 has three prayers sections, all given over to God.

- John 17: 1-5 is where Jesus prays for himself.
- John 17: 6-19 is a prayer for his disciples.
- John 17:20-23 is a prayer for those who will believe

This last section is our primary area for thought for this morning. It is a futuristic, faith filled prayer by Jesus that can teach us a good deal about our own praying and our faith.

I want us to look briefly at three points in Jesus' prayer that are immediately raised:

1. "My prayer is not for them (that is the disciples/apostles) alone..."
2. "I pray for those who will believe in me through their message."
3. "My prayer is that all of them may be one."

Firstly, as alluded to in my opening remarks, we in the church can get so bound up with our microcosm of a community that we fail to look beyond ourselves and see the needs in the wider community. There needs to be a balance of self-care with perceiving and seeking to see the needs in the wider community. The church can too easily become insular, inward looking which sets a path for self-destruction because

there is no impetus to share the Gospel beyond the gathered few. This insulation to the world is not the gospel that Jesus preached and lived. Hence Jesus' prayer, and thus ours, needs to be beyond this gathered group of believers and to lift our eyes beyond the four walls of our building towards the wider community.

Hence, the second point that Jesus makes in his prayer is 'to those who will believe'. This is visionary, futuristic and encouraging to those who share the gospel of Christ to others. Here as Jesus awaits his arrest, trial and death he still manages to impart that there is a future, even after he is gone. There will be those who will come to faith because of the disciples message. In today's context, there are those who will believe because of the message we share with them. This is both exciting but confronting at the same time. As we look around the congregation today I ask: 'whose testimony is it that has brought you to church today?' – how do we answer that question?

For me it was partly my mother's deep faith that she quietly imparted to me over the nurturing years that helped me come to my own decision to follow Christ. The role of parents and grandparents is so important in faith. Today on this Mothers' Day, from a Christian perspective, we need to acknowledge and give thanks for the role of mothers in sharing their faith with their children and then maybe later their grand-children. That nurturing, faithful mothering role is so important in that it offers insight into God through Christ. We probably all have heard the story of the grandmothers in Russia who kept the faith alive with their grandchildren so that even through a Stalinist regime when the church was pushed to one side, today the grandchildren of that era are rebuilding the churches in Russia because of the message given to them by their grand-mothers. When faith seemed to be thrown out and of no use, the faithfulness of the grandmothers has grown another generation of followers/disciples of Christ. We need to pray for those who will come to faith.

Thirdly, Jesus says 'my prayer is that all may be one.'

We're only a few hours away from Jesus' betrayal by his disciples and his agonizing death on the cross. I can think of a few other things to pray for at this time instead of praying for a unity amongst his followers!! Jesus knew a thing or two about humanity – he knew that his disciples were going to need to be unified if the early church was to survive its 'up and downs' and the persecution ahead. This was a priority over his own well-being. Again this was a visionary aspect of Jesus' prayer. Not simply something for the here and now but looking into the future. Not immediate survival, but God's will for God's people as they travelled a difficult road into a difficult future. Part of the unity Jesus prays for comes to fruition in the gift of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate next Sunday. That gift invigorates, energizes and sustains God's people and is part of the impetus that binds us together as the people of God.

Prayer for today's people of God

Lord, make us one. Give us that which we can't have on our own: a loving congregation who worships and serves you as one. In the power of your Holy Spirit enable us to deal honestly with our differences, to tell the truth to each other as truth is given to us, to dare to do the tough work that you assign to us, and yet to do it all together, so that the world may believe that you have sent us, that the world may be able to see that you have loved us and that others may catch a glimpse of you through our lived out faith and so may come to belief in Christ for themselves.

Hear our prayer in the name of Christ, our Lord and our Saviour. Amen.