

**SERMON – 21/5/23****Jesus' Prayer**

John 17:1-11

Jesus prayed for His disciples: 'Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one.' (John 17:11)

Have you ever had an emotional reunion with someone you love? Perhaps you have been parted for a significant period from your spouse or from a child or from a parent or from a friend, and the time has come at last for you to get back together again. Many of us had that experience during the Covid pandemic but it can happen for all kinds of reasons. What an excitement builds towards the day and the moment; what an explosion takes place within you as you first catch sight of them at an airport gate or as a car draws up at your door; how wonderful to *touch* again after days or weeks or months or years even with nothing but letters or phone calls, perhaps with no contact at all.

In the Church's calendar, today is Ascension Sunday, not a minor festival to commemorate an obscure point of theology, but a celebration of the homecoming of the Son of God, when Jesus was taken up before the eyes of His disciples into heaven to be reunited, as it were, with the One in whose presence He had shared glory through eternity before the world began. What a lot had happened in the few short years of Jesus' earthly life when they had been physically parted. Although united spiritually through the wonderful communion they shared in prayer, there had come a point when they had known what it was to be completely separated as the Father laid upon His crucified Son the sin of the world and, because He was of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, He turned from Him and abandoned Him to death and the grave for our sakes. But having raised Him again from the dead and having sent Him back to His disciples for a period to prepare them for the task ahead, the time had now come for their reunion – and what a homecoming it must have been! Next Sunday we will mark the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the outpouring of the presence and power of God upon His people, and the following Sunday is Trinity Sunday when we

reflect upon and marvel at the mystery of the nature of God the Three in One. And that whole progression – the reuniting of the Father and the Son, the sending out of the Holy Spirit, in fact the mystery of the oneness and threeness of God – is what I want to explore with you this morning and to consider what it means for us as a church to reflect that unity in diversity that is the nature of the One whose image we bear as human beings.

When people speak about Christian fellowship, perhaps they have in mind the sense of togetherness that is engendered as a company of Christian people unite to worship and to pray; perhaps they think especially about the fellowship of the Lord's Table (communion and fellowship are the same word in Greek); perhaps their thoughts turn to time spent more informally with other believers chatting after worship or at an event like last Sunday's soup lunch or this Sunday afternoon's walk. And certainly, all of these things are important aspects of Christian fellowship, but what I would like to suggest to you this morning is that we need to look much more deeply than we often do at the nature of our communion and the reason for it, and to consider it in the deeper context of the perfect fellowship that is expressed in the relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Fellowship, you see, is not an optional extra in the life of the church. It is, I believe, of the very essence of our calling in the world as the people of God, to share in and to reflect (however imperfectly) something of the unity and the diversity that is apparent in God's own nature.

The passage we read earlier from John's Gospel, part of Jesus' prayer on the night He was betrayed, gives us much food for thought, as well as a very poignant insight into the relationship of the Lord Jesus with the Father. He speaks of a relationship between equals that is founded upon loving respect – 'Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you. (v.1)... Give me glory in your presence now, the same glory I had with you before the world was made. (v.5)... All I have is yours, and all you have is mine (v.10).' Tenderly, Jesus expresses the perfect balance of giving and receiving that there is in their relationship, each sharing completely with the other, each seeking the other's highest good. But intertwined with what

could so easily have been an all-consuming, *introverted* love is a passion that drives them not only into one another's arms but powerfully outwards to the world. As He expresses His love for the Father, God's Son simultaneously expresses His love for His disciples, rejoicing in the eternal life that they can share, which is the knowledge of the Father and the Son; rejoicing in the revelation of God and His Word that has been unleashed among His people; and praying for them (praying for us!) 'that they may be one just as you and I are one.' (v.11)

Christian fellowship, then, is about being one as God is one, a wonderful and mysterious unity that is not constrictive but is liberating, that is about giving and receiving in perfect balance and turning outwards for the sake of others. It would be a better person than me who would attempt to explain the nature of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is often criticised because it is not explicit in the Bible and because it is just too hard not just for most of us but for all of us to get our heads round! One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Spirit, all equal and entirely one and yet distinctive, individual – it defies all logic, of course it does, but imperfect though it may be it is the best explanation that anyone has ever come up with of what is given to us by revelation in the Bible. There, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all spoken of as God, and yet there is not the slightest hint that there are three Gods – quite the contrary, throughout the Scriptures there is a firm insistence that there is only one God. Even so, the Father speaks about the Son and the Son about the Father, and (as in our passage this morning) they address each other. The Father and the Son speak about and send out the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit reveals the Father and the Son. Inexplicable though it is, there is a constant movement, a relationship, a fellowship and a communion within the Godhead.

And then you have to grapple with the fact that the One who created all things did not remain aloof from creation but took a place within it, born as one of us, sharing in our humanity, dwelling among us in Jesus Christ, dwelling *within* us by the Spirit, in a tangible way sharing something of the eternal fellowship of the Godhead with us in time and space, drawing people to Himself and in the process knocking down the barriers

that separate us from one another. And *that*, it seems to me, has got something vitally important to say to us as we seek to be the Church of God. Although God reaches out to each one of us as a unique individual, He doesn't ever intend our sharing in fellowship with Him to be in isolation from other believers. Throughout the New Testament there is an emphasis on unity – on the people of God as the Body of Christ, on the people of God as living stones being built together into a holy temple, on the people of God as a family sharing around one Table. The aim is not uniformity – far from it – but on unity in diversity, as Jesus prayed that 'they may be one as we are one.'

So what might be the practical consequences of all this for our life as a church, for the fellowship of God's people in a place like this. While I understand the benefits of being able to share in the life of the church online – it is good that people can still be connected to the fellowship when they simply cannot be personally present with others in the church building – but I have to say that I really, *really* miss the physical presence of those of you who have not yet been back to church in person since Covid and I know that our fellowship as a church is being damaged by that.

But our fellowship is not only about our weekly gatherings on Sundays. Christian fellowship is also about the deepening of our knowledge and love for one another throughout the week, and in the stretching of our sense of belonging to the whole people of God throughout the world and throughout time and eternity. How many of us come to church to sing and to pray together and to listen to the same Bible readings and their exposition together, and yet go away again without ever having shared any token of our faith with another person? The challenge that faces us as a church today is to live in deepening fellowship not only with God, crucial though that is, but also with one another, not as an end in itself but as a means to the same end for which God sent His Son into the world, that the world might know Him and come also to share in the life of God.

Jesus prayed, 'Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one *just as you and I are one*.' What is Christian fellowship? Look to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – there is fellowship. To know God is

to have a share in His eternal life, a life that is for living out here and now, day by day, for His glory, for the blessing of our fellow-believers, and for revelation to a world that is a slave to individualism and its twin, loneliness. Love the Lord your God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself – engage with your brothers and sisters in Christ in that balancing act of give and take in which we come to know more of the nature of God and more of His purposes for us; and allow God's passion for the salvation of the world to grow within you and among us, and we *will* be one in the way that God is one.