

John 17:1-11 Sermon

In the 'Questions about faith' box at the back, I recently received the following:

'In the creed, we say that we are in one church. I know that means that we all believe in Christ but what does this mean in regards to all the different denominations that exist, and all the conflicting views within them?'

A fair question, considering the multitude of different types of churches today and even the divisions within our own Church of England. But this question isn't just academic, since at the end of the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus prays about his followers, 'so that they may be one, as we are one.' Do all these denominations and church splits mean that Jesus's prayer is unanswered?

Let's look at Jesus's prayer in a bit more detail before circling back to the question of unity.

This prayer comes at the end of a fairly lengthy farewell speech where Jesus tells his disciples that he will be betrayed and prepares them for his departure. They have eaten the Passover meal together, where they celebrated the time when God saved his people from slavery in Egypt, and now Jesus prays for them before they leave and go to the Garden of Gethsemane.

As Jesus prays here, he isn't a needy petitioner, but is portrayed as someone of great power and status. There are huge themes that run through John's Gospel, but are all brought together in this prayer – glory, eternal life, obedience to God, God's people and their mission to the world. We don't have time to do an exhaustive dive into it all, but let's talk in the first half about glory and eternal life, and then in the second half about our mission to the world and unity.

In the first half of the reading, Jesus prays for himself, asking the Father to 'glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.' Glory, in Hebrew thought carries with it primarily a sense of weightiness. Something which has glory carries weight. This weight can be seen as a sense of authority, or as a sense of dazzling radiance, but it is a weighty thing to be glorified. Jesus is praying that his weightiness might be increased so that God's weightiness might be increased. Jesus shows us the Father, and so he is asking that his life may be a true demonstration of the dazzling radiance, authority and sheer weightiness of God the Father. He isn't seeking shallow fame, personal repute, but God's glory, and he seeks God's glory by doing the work of God on earth – the work of revealing God to those around him, and revealing God more and more in his death and resurrection.

So that's glory – ultimately Jesus seeks God's glory. Would any of us say that we always follow his example?

The there's eternal life. The point of God glorifying Jesus is to bring glory to God, just as the point of giving Jesus authority over all humanity is that he might bring eternal life to all whom God has given him. But eternal life isn't just a weird immortal floating on a disembodied cloud. Instead, in John's Gospel, and in Jewish thought, eternal life is talk about a sense of there being the present age and also an 'age to come'. Eternal life is the age to come, and Jesus brings about the decisive moment when this happens. The signs he performs and the 'I am' sayings are all moments of the breaking into the present age of this age to come. With Jesus comes this new creation for all those whom God has called. It isn't a boring harp on a cloud, but a remaking of the world as we know it for a future eternity with God.

So that's the first half – Jesus prays that God the Father will glorify him so that he may bring glory to God.

Then in the second half, Jesus prays for his followers, and this includes us. In fact, he specifically draws a line between those who have received him, and those of the rest of the world. Here, he is only praying for his followers – that they would be kept protected through God’s name and authority and that they may be one and Jesus is one with his Father.

Interestingly, this protection for his people whilst they remain in the world is so that they can be one, united as Jesus’s followers, including you and me, carrying out Jesus’s mission on earth. Jesus’s mission is to say and do the things of his Father, and our mission is to therefore say and do the things of Jesus, making Jesus weighty in the eyes of the world, and therefore making God weighty. This protection that Jesus prays for, is protection from anything which dissolves this unity of purpose. Just as Jesus did his Father’s work, so we do too. As we do that, we do so in unity. And Jesus prays for protection against anything which would divide this. Our unity is to be modelled on the unity of Father and Son and their joint will and mission.

So for us, the questions are, are we doing the will of the Father just as Jesus did? Do our lives bring glory to Jesus, making him dazzlingly radiant in authority across the peoples of the earth? Have we, as Jesus’s followers, been distracted from this?

To return to our starting question, what does this unity mean for all our church denominations and schisms? We talk in the Creed about the ‘Holy Catholic Church’ by which we mean the universal church of Jesus – however that looks and whatever form it takes. It may be that a variety of churches, each worshipping differently, enabling more and more people to come to Jesus is in fact a good thing for the mission of God in the world. I would argue that in Menston, certainly the people in leadership of the three churches – us, the Roman Catholics, and the Methodists – seek to bring glory to God through our varied worship and witness to our community. I could say the same about the multiple congregations within St John’s – Zest, the 11am, the 6pm, Thursday communion, Den, Core – all worship in different ways, but all seek to bring glory to Jesus.

The problem arises when this isn’t the case – when we let our own theological or practical quibbles detract from the glory of Jesus. Historically, this is clearly a problem. Burning people who don’t agree with our version of Communion doesn’t seem very glorifying when seen through today’s eyes! Equally, the vehemence of some of the conflicts within the Church of England at the moment do not bring glory to Jesus. That’s not to say that these are unimportant, but that the way we handle conflict is important, and sadly, none of us always gets that right. As individuals and groups, denominations or factions within denominations, all of the history of Jesus’s church is littered with times where God is not glorified through the actions of his people.

Does that mean that Jesus’s prayer has failed? - that God the Father has not protected us from those things which divide us or separate us from the mission of doing what God asks in our world? I’ll let you decide. However, for what it’s worth, I think that often the divisions are human-made, and often come from the times where we take our eyes off Jesus, and just like St Peter walking on the water, we start looking at other concerns – like the needs of the institution, or the status quo, or the need to be relevant and in keeping with culture, or conversely, the need to be seen to be counter-cultural. When we do that, taking our eyes off Jesus, we sink, just like Peter did.

For the whole church, and for each one of us, let us receive the prayer of Jesus and seek to bring glory to God the Father through our words and actions, and let this unity of purpose bring us together, even as we worship differently. May we be one just as Jesus is one with the Father. Amen.