

## **Bible Study I**

### **NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - FORUM 9-13 JULY 2004**

#### **“IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS”**

John 17: 20 - 18:1

<sup>20</sup> “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup> Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. <sup>25</sup> Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

<sup>1</sup> “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.”

The last discourse of Jesus in St John’s Gospel which begins with his washing his disciples’ feet, ends with the opening sentence of the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter: “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.” Obviously, this last discourse was delivered very much in the shadow of the Cross.

It began with a gesture of humility, service and love when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, and ended with Jesus crossing the valley where he would begin the final tragic but triumphant act of his life which would manifest even more powerfully this humility, service and love upon the Cross of Calvary. In John 13:1, as the discourse begins, we are told that “Jesus knew that the hour had come to depart from this world” and that “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” The very last words of the discourse are Jesus’ prayer “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26), and then he went with them across the valley.

The whole discourse is an utterance of love in the context of the most definitive and extraordinary act of love. His message has a certain urgency because of his love and given the impending climax of his life. In St John’s Gospel it has a very special place among all of Jesus’ teachings.

What is particularly significant about the last verses of this discourse are that they contain a prayer of Jesus, and not just a prayer on behalf of his disciples, but also as he says “on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.”

It is good as we reflect upon the mystery of Jesus' death for us upon the Cross, to reflect also upon this last prayer which John has given to us, which was in fact a prayer for us. We are some of the continuing harvest of which Jesus spoke in John 4:35.

What is it that Jesus prayed for? He prayed quite simply "that they may all be one". He described that unity in terms of his own relationship with the Father. "As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us."

We make a mistake when we are talking about unity between the churches or the unity within our own Christian community if we start with or focus primarily upon our relationship with each other. The unity that Christians are called to and established in or formed into, is a unity born on the Cross. It involves a very particular kind of relationship. This relationship is not only modeled on the kind of relationship that Jesus has with his Father, or indeed the Second Person of the Trinity has with the First Person of the Trinity, but involves a participation by us in that very same relationship. As he said: "May they be in us" and again later: "that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." He also speaks of our abiding in his love. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." (15:9). There is a mutual indwelling of Jesus in the Father and the Father in him and of believers in him and he in them, so that they dwell in the very inner life of God where Father and Son are one.

The unity Christians have with each other arises from this prior unity they have with Christ. "I in them" he says. That Jesus, the risen Lord, lives in each Christian, lays the foundation for their having a real relationship with the Father, or more accurately, participating in his relationship with the Father. Already in 15:1-11 Jesus had spoken of his abiding in his disciples. "Abide in me as I abide in you", like a branch abiding in a vine.

Any experience we may have of unity between Christians is a result not of a particular kind of community life we have been wise enough or skillful enough to develop. It is not the result of any particular adaptation of contemporary social theory about how communities are formed. It is not even the result of the Spirit-created virtue of the members of the Christian community who seek to love each other and to forgive and to tolerate each other's weaknesses, after the model of Christ.

The unity we have with each other as Christians flows only out of the unity we have with and in Christ. The unity we have with each other is a consequence of the unity we have in the very inner life of the Trinity. Because we are taken by Christ in whom we live, or as he said in this text, as those in whom he lives, into his relationship with the Father, we are thereby drawn into the heart of the Triune God; and so we are one. The unity we speak of is a profound, indeed divine unity, arising from our participation in the life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made possible by his death and resurrection.

Our effort to work for unity within our own congregations, parishes, dioceses, churches, denominations, or whatever, has as its foundation this unity which is a pure gift of the risen Lord who died so that we might experience it. It is called elsewhere "*koinonia* /communion", rather than simply "community", because whatever we may observe among Christians which we would call "community" is but a visible expression of this deeper common participation in the very life of the Triune God.

While the word "community" may dominate our pastoral discourse and be the focus of our pastoral planning, we make a real error if we think "community" in this narrow, or if you like,

horizontal sense is what we are trying to achieve. Communion or unity as Jesus spoke of it, is the gift and task of the Church, and communion is something that can only be experienced by believers who have been claimed by Christ who has incorporated them into himself so that he might take them, in himself and together, into the inner life of the Triune God. There they share in his relationship with the one he calls 'Father' and whom he has taught to call 'Father'.

Once one recognises this deeper source of communion and community, one can recognize that pastoral efforts to achieve a higher degree of faith in one's community or a deeper level of prayer in one's community will achieve much more than any number of social gatherings or facilitated programs for community building, helpful as these might be. These may be important for us to meet each other and be able to name each other, but unless we recognize each other in faith and within the life of the Trinity, real communion does not develop. Communion can only be built by faith as a pure gift of a gracious God, and communion or unity is the deeper reality of Christian community.

There is another aspect of this final prayer of Jesus that is inextricably linked with the profound depth of the relationship of unity which Jesus prayed we might have. He prayed that we may be one, so that the world may believe that the Father had sent him. Or as he said later, "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me". The unique unity with God which his death made possible, which is a sharing of the unity of the Triune God with us, is for a purpose made that it might be shared. Our unity exists to some extent to bring others to believe in Jesus and what he has revealed.

The loving movement of God the Father in our direction which led to the sending of the Son, his death and resurrection, and then the sending of the Holy Spirit into our world, has no limits on who can be the recipients of that love or on the boundaries of the communion that it seeks to build. If we are called and carried into communion with the Triune God, and Jesus prayed that we may experience that to the full, and manifest it to the full, it is because we are part of a much larger plan that the whole cosmos might be restored to communion with the Triune God through Jesus Christ. Could we say that in a sense Jesus' love for us is not just for our sake, but for the sake of this larger mission as well?

In St John's Gospel, his life on this earth was about to end, but his mission was to continue. It continued above all through the sending of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit would be sent most obviously to those who had been called into him, so that they could carry on the mission for which he came, which again has no limits and no boundaries.

Therefore, communion or this unity of which Jesus spoke is not only our own participation in salvation or the kingdom of God, but is also always the goal lying ahead of us. Not only do we continually deepen our own participation in or communion with the Triune God and with each other, but we are driven also by the same divine love which knows no bounds, to extend that communion across every barrier and into every corner of the world and every layer of our culture and every aspect of creation.

The relationship between unity and mission is found in love, the love of the Father for Jesus and his love for his disciples, which establishes them in the very unity of love between the Father and the Son. For someone else to see or to experience the communion / unity of Christians with God and each other, is for them to see the love of God and then perhaps to accept it. Our witness to communion / unity is their invitation to communion / unity.

Jesus prayed at the end of his discourse: “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you and these know that you have sent me. I make your name known to them and I will make it known so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.” We know, as Jesus’ first disciples knew, that the Father sent him. In that simple phrase, the entire identity of Jesus is summed up.

He is the one sent by the Father and as such, his word can be trusted. His unique relationship with the Father manifest in his authority, his power, his teaching, his signs enabled his followers eventually to discern that he was Son of God in a unique way, that he himself was divine. Therefore, when he spoke, when he made the Father’s name known, he revealed God to them and so to us in a unique and definitive way. And when they saw his “glory” (17:22) which the Father had given him by loving him, they realized it was because God had loved him “before the foundation of the world” (17:24) as Jesus himself said.

In all the contemporary confusion about what our message ought to be and how we ought to respond to the presence of other world religions in Australia and in the larger world, we do not have the freedom to compromise these truths. We cannot settle for the kind of salvation which would be available in many different unrelated ways, or for a truth which could be found in many different unrelated forms. Our Gospel is Jesus Christ and if Jesus Christ is truly the divine Son of God, the Word made flesh, then he is unique, our message is unique, and our communion is unique.

Therefore, we have an enormous responsibility to allow his prayer to take root in our lives, in our communities and in our hearts. We must become one so that the world will believe that indeed it is the Father who has sent him. Working to restore the unity of Christians is not just one work or task of the Church. Christian unity is not just the responsibility of certain designated officials within a Christian community. Working to further Christian unity is not just a ministry or aspect of our mission with a limited and specific priority.

Given that Jesus prayed that we might be one before he crossed the Kidron Valley with his disciples, working for the restoration of Christian unity flows from our very relationship with Jesus Christ. Not to be committed to overcoming all obstacles that hinder the unity among the followers of Jesus Christ is to fail in an aspect of one’s commitment to Christ. This does not mean that there are not specialists in ecumenical work, that there are not particular works that can be called “ecumenical”. What this means is that every aspect of our life as Christians, every aspect of the life of our communities, has to be affected by Jesus praying that we might be one, so that the world may believe. Therefore all our efforts to assist the world to believe must be intimately related to this other commitment and effort to become one.

Pope John Paul II said in 1985 that “The search for unity and ecumenical concern are a necessary dimension of the whole of the Church’s life. Everything in the Church can and must contribute to it.” He had understood this prayer of Christ at the end of the discourse in St John’s Gospel. Every aspect of the Church has to be seen as not just an aspect of the Christian community to which one belongs, but also as an aspect of the larger Christian community to which we all belong. Nothing we do or plan ought to be seen as private or unrelated, unconnected, with what other Christians believe or plan.

We cannot do everything together and we cannot be in total contact with each other or to share everything, but there is an ecumenical dimension to everything we do. There is always the presence in some way and to some degree of those who like us have been taken by Christ into the

most intimate relationships of the Triune God and who therefore have the most intimate, most profound relationships with us. Working for the restoration of unity among Christians is an aspect, a dimension, of our very Christian existence.

One of the most recent statements on Christian unity by Pope John Paul II was in a homily at a mass on Trinity Sunday in Bern, Switzerland, on June 6 this year, in the presence of some representatives of other Christian communities, though many had refused the invitation. He reflected upon the very text about which we have been speaking:

“The three Persons, equal and separate, are one God. *Their real distinction does not divide the unity of their divine nature.*

Christ proposed this immensely deep communion to us, his disciples, as a model: *‘that they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me’* (Jn 17:21). The celebration of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity is a *strong appeal for the commitment to unity*. It is an appeal that *involves everyone*, Pastors and faithful alike, and impels all to a renewed consciousness of their personal responsibility in the Church, the Bride of Christ. How is it possible, in the face of these words of Christ, not to feel the *goad of ecumenism*? I reaffirm also on this occasion *the desire to advance on the path to full communion with all believers, albeit difficult, yet full of joy.*”

Until we long for the completeness that can only come when we embrace each other totally in Christ, we will fail to respond fully to that prayer of his which he made, according to St John, the night before he died.

I think we can go further here and recognize that Christ’s prayer was a prayer of his heart. Our hearts have become one with Christ’s through our faith and baptism. We are constantly being transformed into Him. He is living in us and we in Him. We are being refashioned to become like him in every way. His thoughts become our thoughts. His mind our mind. His love takes over our weak efforts to love.

If all this is true, then it is equally true that his prayer ought to take over our prayer. If there was a longing in his heart that we might be one, then within the hearts of everyone here, there is a similar longing which perhaps we have not yet noticed. If it mattered to him, then it matters to us somewhere within the deepest recesses of our spirit where he resides. We need to let that prayer surface. We need to let it surface in the heart of every Christian so that there is a constant chorus “Father, may we be one so that the world will believe that it is you who sent him.”

If that prayer arose with such great passion in his heart, as St John so graphically depicted it, the night on which he began his final suffering, then it can arise with that same passion in our hearts.

Every time we look at the Cross, we need to realize that our disunity is an enormous offence against the incredible love that the Cross symbolizes. And at least we can pray in Him, alone and in our own Christian communities, and together, that the longing of His heart for which He died, might be fulfilled; that we will become one and the world will believe that it is the Father who sent Him.

**Bishop Michael Putney**