

Unity: John 17:1-26

On Friday I attended a funeral of someone in their 80s, who I had known for nearly 20 years.

At any funeral, there is often an attempt made to imply the unity of the deceased with members of their family, and their associates.

While not drawing any conclusions in connection with this particular deceased person, it did get my thoughts travelling in a different direction from what I had already prepared on how to introduce my remarks today.

One needs to ask - from a Christian perspective - "What is Unity?"

Aman covered quite a bit on this a few weeks ago while Pat and I were in Melbourne. He kindly lent me his notes so that I wouldn't unwittingly duplicate any of his points.

Searching the bible, I made a short list from about a third of what I found, and it was still too long to use... so I refined it twice more.

There ARE several duplications, and having being raised in a Middle-Eastern background, it occurs to me that those repeated references were very important in understanding the topic.

You see, repetition is the way in biblical times that a point was emphasised - they didn't have bold fancy fonts you could make jump off your web page. Or even to flash on the screen.

Repeating is still the way of the Middle East in conversational emphasis these days.

Now I shall use the word of God almost entirely, rather than injecting my opinion, so let us start...

There is just the one point in today's message. It is contained in the twenty six verses of chapter seventeen of John's gospel. In this marvellous capture of the prayer which Jesus prayed AFTER the Last Supper, and BEFORE their trip into the Garden - an encapsulation which of the four gospel writers only John records - we get an insight into the depth of the relationship that Jesus and The Father had with each other.

Yes, it was mutual. And it was about unity.

This prayer has been called the "true" or "real" Lord's Prayer by some commentators, in comparison with Matthew's gospel's different one - which they suggest should be more correctly called the "Apostles' Prayer" because Jesus used it by way of illustration in teaching the Apostles how to pray to the Father.

Like many traditional Christians and Jews over the centuries, the apostles were familiar with stereotyped prayers recited by priests or other folk "up front", rather than prayer from the heart which comes from a relationship with the Father to whom we pray. That was why Jesus needed to teach them how to pray.

The aspect which Jesus stresses a number of times during this prayer after the Last Supper explains in great detail the depth of relationship He expects to be sought after and lived by His disciples...

and then further down the chapter we discover that He wasn't talking about John the beloved Disciple, nor Peter, nor young John Mark, nor Zaccaeus...

He was talking about YOU, and YOU, and YOU, and YOU, and ME...

After that scripture search I described earlier, I found enough instances of "one" and "unity" in this context to read out loud for well over an hour, without getting to the meat of the message...

not that there should ever be a problem in expounding the inspired word for that long, but we do need to have order in our assembling if we are to live the apostle's counsel.

Remember that another apostle stresses we should move on from the milk diet to meat.

In what context, meat instead of milk? In our hearing, learning, heeding, following, and living the gospel.

First a quote from the Old Testament, from the Psalms...

(Ps 133:1-2) Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion.

Oil is a reference to the influence of the Spirit.

And now several quotes from the New Testament, and to avoid distractions, I may not give chapter and verse on every occasion. This first one is from the epistle to the Ephesians...

(Ephesians 4:1-3) I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:4-7) There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

While we are about it, we should remember that Jesus told us that the way we are called to follow will NOT be a bed of roses, and that we will be hated and despised by the world if we honestly and truly followed Him... We can read one example here, from several...

(Luke 12:51-53) "Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. "For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. "Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

So, unity comes at a price, right? Unity is not a bed of roses either inside the Body, or outside the Body. Jesus tells us that. One may ponder if we are having it easy, are we following Jesus? Or perhaps following the world?

(Luke 17:33-37) "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. "I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. "Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. "Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left."

And they answered and said to Him, "Where, Lord?" So He said to them, "Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

Eagles are, of course, a symbol of the body of believers taken in the context of the Bible. And in understanding those verses of scripture we should realise that there is absolutely no doubt that Jesus was talking about a group consisting of only believers, not a mixture of believers and unbelievers, yoked together unequally.

That is a sobering thought. Applying those mathematics here right now, out of every ten here at this moment, four might be acceptable to Him, and six might not. I do not presume to judge who falls into which category.

But keep watching the seat next to you in case it suddenly becomes vacated as we approach the time of the end!

Actually, that is a bad taste joke purely to get your attention, but the message is scriptural. Please consider it.

In the words of Luke, the physician, writing his second letter to his Roman friend Theophilus, he describes the behaviour of the early Christians in a quite striking way...

(Acts 2:46-47) So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Is that happening now? I would also suggest that "being saved" suggests an ongoing process, too.

Paul encapsulates the message in several ways... emphasising the KISS principle - "Keep It Simple, Saint" - and always in a relational existence...

(Romans 15:5-7) Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

The depth of the personal relationship which Christians then had with one another is summed up well in these four quotes from four different epistles - letters with a purpose - written by two of the apostles...

(1 Corinthians 16:20) All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

(2 Corinthians 13:12) Greet one another with a holy kiss.

(1 Peter 5:14) Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 16:16) Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

Can the message be stated more plainly?

(1 Corinthians 12:12) For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

(1 Corinthians 12:15) If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?

(1 Corinthians 12:16) And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?

(1 Corinthians 12:18) But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

(1 Corinthians 12:21) And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

(1 Corinthians 12:22) No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

(1 Corinthians 12:25) that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.

(1 Corinthians 12:26) And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

This really emphasises that each of us, like the individual parts of the human body, is absolutely necessary for the whole Body to function.

Let me make a point. Do we realise that were I to decide to withdraw my support for the elders, it would cause the rest of you - the rest of the Body - to cease to function? Like if a real leg were amputated below the knee? Even with an artificial limb fitted, the Body would never again function to the degree it did before.

Think about that. Should I go and take my ball with me and play somewhere else, just because someone doesn't want to talk to me? Of course not. And, with due respect, neither should any of "you"... and I can fairly say that because I have just made the point that I shall not do so.

(Colossians 3:12-17) Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another;

Even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

It is John, the disciple beloved of the Lord, who points us to the practicality of unity, being one with the Lord and one with ones' brothers and sisters.

(1 John 4:7-8) Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

(1 John 5:7) For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

(2 John 1:5) And now I plead with you, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.

(2 John 1:6) This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.

Nowhere does he describe it better than in his record of that prayer I mentioned earlier where Jesus surrenders His responsibility towards His disciples back to the Father.

We are going to do something quite different now.

I would like you to listen to a track from a CD where the crux of John 17 is set to music - and afterwards I'll read through to the end. Please don't try to follow in your Bibles, because we shall be using the Amplified Version, where the translators provide several different ways of understanding what the original Greek meant.

This will, I believe, provide a greater in-depth understanding of what the author of that gospel wanted us to hear.

So, if you would like to close your eyes while I read this chapter, so that you can't see me visibly, that would be fine. It is often better to listen to the Word being read that way.

You can follow the words to the song on overhead, and let me read the composer's introduction to this particular piece, the eleventh of thirty-one separate pieces in this oratorio, which was written in 1987 by Queenslander Murray Wylie.

“While Jesus was with His disciples, He "kept them in the (Father's) Name". (John 17:12).

This means that He had declared and shown to them the dimension of fellowship in which He lived with the Father, and had kept the disciples in this relationship.

Now at the point of His departure, He prayed that they would be kept "in the name", and that they would be one even as He and the Father were one (vs 20-23); i.e. that they might share the same love and unity as existed within the Godhead Himself.”

So, reading from John's gospel, from the end of the Last Supper...

John 16:31-33, John 17:1

Jesus answered them. Do you now believe? Do you believe it at last?

But take notice, the hour is coming, and it has arrived, when you will all be dispersed and scattered, every man to his own home, leaving Me alone. Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.

I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have perfect peace and confidence. In the world you have tribulation, trials, distress and frustration; but take courage: be confident, certain, undaunted! For I have deprived the world of power to harm you, and have conquered it for you.

17:1 When Jesus had spoken these things, He lifted up His eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify, exalt, honour, and magnify Your Son, so that Your Son may glorify, honour and magnify You.

Roll Jerusalem Passion CD1 Track 11...

<sit down; leave notes/bible>

Voice over the organ postlude in two brackets...

17:1 When Jesus had spoken these things, He lifted up His eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify, exalt, honour, and magnify Your Son, so that Your Son may glorify, honour and magnify You.

2. You have granted Him power and authority over all humankind, now glorify Him so that He may give eternal life to all whom You have given Him.

<crescendo>

3. This is eternal life: it means to recognise, become acquainted with, and understand You, the only true and real God, and likewise to know Him, Jesus, as the Christ, the Anointed One, whom You have sent.

4. I have glorified You down here on the earth by completing the work that You gave Me to do.

5. Now, Father, glorify Me along with Yourself; restore Me to such majesty and honour in Your presence as I had with You before the world existed.

6. I have revealed Your real Self, Your Name, to the people whom You gave Me out of the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have obeyed and kept Your word.

7. Now at last they know and understand that all You have given Me is really and truly Yours.

8. For the uttered words that You gave Me I have given them; they received and accepted them and have come to know positively and in reality, believing with absolute assurance that I came forth from Your presence, and they are convinced that You did send Me.

9. I pray for them. Not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they belong to You.

10. All things that are Mine are Yours, and all things that are Yours are Mine, and I am glorified through them. They have done me honour; in them My glory is achieved.

11. Now I am no more in the world, but these are still there. I come to You, Holy Father, so keep in Your Name - in the knowledge of Yourself - those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are one.

<crescendo>

12. While I was with them, I kept and preserved them in Your Name - in the knowledge and worship of You. Those You have given Me I guarded and protected, and not one of them is lost except the "Son of Perdition" - Judas of Kerrioth, Judas Iscariott, that the scripture might be fulfilled [Ps 41:9, John 6:70]

13. Read on from Amplified Bible on pulpit.

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