

St. Mary's Sermons

John 17:20-26

Unity

There was an old monastery that had fallen on hard times. Centuries earlier it had been a thriving monastery where many dedicated monks lived and worked and had great influence, but now only five monks lived there and they were all well over 70 years old. This was clearly a dying order.

A few miles from the monastery lived an old hermit who many thought was a prophet. One day, as the monks agonised over the impending demise of their order, they decided to visit the hermit to see if he might have some advice for them. Perhaps he would be able to see the future and show them what they could do to save the monastery.

The hermit welcomed the five monks to his hut, but when they explained the purpose of their visit he could only commiserate with them, "Yes I understand how it is," said the hermit, "but the spirit has gone out of the people, hardly anyone cares much for old things anymore." "Is there anything you can tell us", the Abbott enquired of the hermit, "that could help us save the monastery?" "No I'm sorry, replied the hermit. "I don't know how your monastery can be saved; the only thing that I know is that one of you is an apostle of God".

The monks were both disappointed and confused by the hermit's cryptic statement. They returned to the monastery wondering what the hermit could have meant by the statement that "one of you is an apostle of God". For months after the visit the monks pondered the significance of the hermit's words.

One of us is an apostle of God they mused. Did he actually mean one of the monks here at the monastery? That's impossible. We are all too old, we are all too insignificant. On the other hand what if it is true and if it is true, then which one of us is it?

"Do you suppose that he meant the Abbott? Yes if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbott. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man, a man of wisdom and light. He couldn't have meant Brother Elred. Elred gets crotchety at times and is difficult to reason with. On the other hand, he is almost always right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred. But surely he could not have meant Brother Phillip? Brother

Phillip is so passive, so shy, a real no body. Still he is always there when you need him. He is loyal and trustworthy; yes he could have meant Phillip

As the old monks contemplated in this way they began to treat each other with extra ordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be an Apostle of God and on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the apostle spoken of by the hermit, each monk also began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

Because the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, many people came there to picnic on its lawns and to walk on its paths and now and then to go into its tiny chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate from them. Permeating the atmosphere of the whole place, there was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to bring their friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought their friends.

As more and more visitors came, some of the younger men started to talk to the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them, then another, then another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, and thanks to the hermits wisdom a vibrant centre of light and spiritually throughout the region. I did contemplate going and sitting down at this point!

The opening verse of our reading is completely mind blowing. In the final hours of his time here on earth, as he was facing the horrendous prospect of his agonising death on the cross, Jesus was not, as we might expect, praying for himself for strength and courage to go through with the traumatic ordeal, but was actually praying for us. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that he was not just praying for the original group of 11 disciples, but for everyone who would come to believe in him.

The important question, then, that we should ask is: Exactly what was Jesus praying for as he thinks about you and me and all his other followers in this and every generation? The primary focus of Jesus' prayer was that we might be united, that we might be one and the purpose of that unity is that the world might come to believe in him. That's how important Jesus considered unity to

be. A couple of weeks ago we talked about the very real practical love that the early Christians had for one another. And we concluded that unity is one of the by-products of genuine Christian love. I love my friend J. John's catchy little saying, "None of us have got it together but together we have got it." I also came across this lovely little anecdote, snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things but just look what they can do when they stick together.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that we are to make every effort to maintain this unity. I have been very concerned by some people's response to the PCC decision to change from bread to wafers during communion. Sadly this has the potential for causing a split within our church. I have thought and prayed a lot about this issue and will be proposing a compromise position to the PCC on Tuesday evening which I very much hope and pray will be acceptable to everyone and will enable us to maintain our unity and for us all to continue to worship together.

Unity can never be a formal arrangement. It isn't just an outward thing. It is based on and must mirror nothing less than the unity between the father and the son. Just as the father is in the son and the son in the father, so we too are to live in the same unity. This unity stretches across all the traditional barriers of race, custom, gender and class. I'm sure we have all from time to time had opportunities to experience this sort of unity for ourselves. I believe that this is one of the reasons which make's big events like New Wine so special. We come from diverse backgrounds yet we come with the same purpose of encountering our wonderful Lord Jesus Christ in worship the love and unity is often tangible. No wonder then that God is able to release so many blessings upon his people.

However we are all too aware that we live in the real world where it is often painfully obvious that Jesus' prayer for us has not yet been fully answered. There is an old Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy demands that Linus changes TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't comply. "What makes you think that you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus. "These five fingers," says Lucy, "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." "Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organised like that?"

As with any relationship unity cannot be forced. There can be no bullying or manipulation. Although we do live in a divided world where the divisions have so often run down so called religious lines, there is no excuse whatsoever for Christians not to work afresh in each generation towards the unity that Jesus prayed for.

That is why I am 100% committed to the churches together group and look for every opportunity I possibly can to work together with our brother and sisters in Christ and why I would encourage us all to support churches together initiatives. Our divisions are often based on wrong assumptions as the pulpit exchange earlier in the year proved. We might not think anybody notices when we work together but I can assure you that they do.

My prayer for us here at St Mary's echoes Jesus' prayer that we might so love one another that we might become one in heart and mind that the favour of God may rest upon us that as a result others might be drawn to find out more about our God.