

Sunday 20 May 2007: The Seventh Sunday of Easter

“That we may be one.”

Reading: John 17.20-end

“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you.”

Our Gospel today comes from the very heart of Jesus. It is Jesus’ own prayer found in John’s Gospel at the end of the farewell discourse to his disciples. Jesus is about to leave them. He faces not only the agony of the passion which lies before him, but also the human pain of leaving those he loves – so much of his concern is not about the crisis he himself faces but his concerns and fears for all of them. Up until this point they have faced the growing opposition together – but Jesus has read the signs – he knows that the group is about to be pulled apart and that they will be separated from one another. Collective courage and a faith formed in solidarity with one another will disintegrate. These disciples will be scattered by his death and all the resulting confusion and sense of betrayal. Jesus knows that hope lies in them holding together with him and with God even after he has departed. This is the move from the disciples being led, to the disciples living out their own faith. And of course there is the risk that they will be lost.

Jesus’ prayer is not locked in a forgotten context and time. Through his prayer for those immediate disciples he points beyond them to all who will become disciples through their witness and their testimony. And this prayer to hold together in unity is just as much for each one of us today as we face our own divisions, partings and scatterings. The prayer of Christ – that we all be one – has certainly not ended. He prayed this prayer in Jerusalem, the Holy City – the city of God’s promise of peace. It is the city where the three great Abrahamic Faiths meet, but also a city which has come to symbolise for many the pain of human division and all the resulting fear and mistrust. In 2001, in this city empty of tourists because of the violence, I wandered between the quarters of this city marvelling at the rich diversity and yet separateness of these cultures side by side within the same city walls. The Armenian Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Jewish Quarter – each quarter with its own atmosphere and uniqueness: with different dress, head covering, language, sense of space, smells, displays of food and goods, each with its different call to prayer. In the Jewish Quarter I found myself in a Jewish bookstore being welcomed as a Jewish pilgrim until I told them where I was staying in the Muslim part of Jerusalem and that I had entered the city through the Damascus Gate and the Muslim Quarter. Then there was silence before a young man spoke. “I have lived in this city for seventeen years and I have never entered through the Damascus Gate. The Damascus Gate was only about 500 metres from where we stood yet his comment revealed the suspicion and segregation. It is not just between faiths that we find the divisions which humans create: in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, marking the place where it is believed our Lord died and was buried and rose from the dead, we find a Church which is divided up into portions controlled by different denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian, and Coptic Churches: signs both of the hope and the challenge of greater Christian unity. The story is told that the key to the Holy

Sepulchre is held by a Muslim doorman to prevent arguments among the Christians over who is in charge!

Everywhere you go in the Holy Land you see signs of division: barriers, check-points, road-blocks, fences, lines of Palestinians waiting to have their documents checked and now this massive concrete wall carving its way through the land; shutting out terrorism or locking it in? News in the Gaza is about the divisions between Hamas and Fata and the continuing bloodshed caused by the Israeli retaliatory air strikes.

Some Christian pilgrims I have heard come away from Jerusalem feeling their Christian illusions have been shattered: it was not what they had expected - they could not find the Biblical images they had painted in their minds since childhood. But to me it was more real. Here was Christ's struggle in the world as it is, not as it ought to be. Here was Christ's frustration and his longing. Here were Christ's prophetic words crying out to be realised. Here was the potential to meet, to create dialogue, to learn from difference but also the warning of what happens because of the barriers and divisions we build. Here was the failure of prayer – Christ's own prayer but here too was the knowledge that Christ himself knew this same struggle and cried out to both God and man for the only possible solution: “that we may all be **one**” just as he was one with the Father. One, not in conformity but in humanity; created by God, held by God, children of the same Father. In stark terms it is the choice we all face – in the words of Deuteronomy – the choice between life and death, God's blessing and God's curse – the gift of life juxtaposed with the chaos of pain and human division.

Right from the very beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures there are narratives which tell the story of human division. Adam caught in the act of disobedience hiding from God and in his shame – divided from Eve whom he blames and divided from God. Eve in her turn blames the serpent – cast out from Eden they are both now in conflict with their world rather than harmony. Divisions escalate: brother turns against brother in wounded pride and jealousy. It is the curse of Cain – tribes divide against themselves and one another, nation against nation. The Tower of Babel is a cacophony of discord. Division is seen to be the method of the evil one. The language of evil may seem out of place in our post-modern world – but Christ's words point very directly to the work of evil: “Father protect them in your Name. I am not asking you to take them out of the world but I ask you to protect them from the evil one”. Evil – the force which tears communities apart and separates from God's forgiveness and love, which undermines trust, breeds fear and prejudice and whose methods are those of manipulation and deceit igniting hatred. It can start so quickly, the incident so seemingly small but evil feeds upon itself, the momentum it generates becomes so consuming.

It can begin as a small misunderstanding in our own family or relationships, it can be seen in neighbourhoods, in institutions, in the Church, in nations. Turn on the news and it will be filled with stories of division: last week - the Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Darfur, and from the Congo. On BBC Radio 4 at 7.45 in the morning while many of us were getting up and eating our cornflakes a Congolese woman was graphically describing the brutal murder of 50 members of her family and tribe – killed, bayoneted, raped, decapitated in front of her by the Interahamwe – the Interahamwe whose members ten years ago carried out the genocide in Rwanda. At the end of the interview the Congolese Woman was asked what she would like to

happen to the Interahamwe if those who had perpetrated this massacre were ever caught and she answered “I am a Christian. I do not want revenge. I just want them to go back and leave us alone so we can live in peace.”

What can you do in the face of such terrible human suffering except to stand where Jesus stood and enter into his same prayer? It is the prayer of that Congolese woman too. It is the knowledge that to be a Christian, even in total powerlessness, is to reject the cycles of destructiveness and revenge which ravage our world. To be a Christian is to be a reconciled community longing for reconciliation. It is, in whatever small and insignificant way we can, to live Christ’s prayer of unity: “that we may be one”. And what a travesty of Christ’s message of love our Anglican Church is when it becomes an example to the world of hypocrisy, squabbling and petty division. At St Martin-in-the-Fields the International Consultation which we are carrying is our attempt to discern how we as a Church can stand in solidarity and presence and learn from those in greatest need. Our contributions to Christian Aid this week are similarly a small expression of our desire to build global relationships.

Christ sought a unity which acknowledged our mutual interdependence – which respected the dignity of each human life – every hair of our head is counted he proclaimed, not one sparrow falls unknown to the Father. This is the faith which wants to set the other free to live life in all its fullness and which prays for community – *with unity* – not the success of the few at the expense of the many.

And is not this the Church we are really looking for? One actually not built with human hands but a Church which is actually a meeting place with God and with one another? A Church where we can sit down with pews or without pews, side by side with people who may be completely different from ourselves and hold very different opinions – in the knowledge that we are held within the same God and that being held by God we hold each other too – whatever the blemish, whatever the disagreement – we are living communion, and broken we try in whatever small way we can to reach out and receive from our divided world.

The Spirit of God which Christ promises to send to live within us has the power to breach the check-points and the barricades and open up relationships we never believed possible.

The Holy Spirit we await comes not as an object to be grasped, nor as an ideology to be signed up to. It cannot be measured or contained – it is a rushing wind, it is tongues of fire, it is a confidence to communicate across all divisions. It is the gift of Christ that we may hold the glory and peace of God within ourselves and acknowledge it in the lives of others.

Like the first disciples we will not forget the crucifixions of our world or the evils that led us there. But neither like them will we live in fear behind locked doors. A group of fishermen, tax collectors, and sinners were empowered to reach beyond themselves and enter into the life and love of God and we who have heard their witness are invited to receive that same Spirit and to reach beyond our pride, our fears and our most dearly held prejudices and be united in the life of God too.