

Sunday June 2nd 2019 John 17: 20-26 / Acts 16: 16-34

Prayer: Lord God, open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts that we may hear and receive your Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This week we are joining with the church throughout the world to focus on prayer – under the banner of Thy Kingdom Come. We have celebrated the Ascension and now we join with the disciples in seeking and praying for the Holy Spirit to come in power upon us. We are holding prayer times at 9 am, 12 noon and 6.30 pm here each day to which you are more than welcome. A focus in prayer will be that more people may come to know Jesus and all may grow in their faith.

Something very special happens when we pray. It reconnects us with God and allows us to begin to see things from his perspective. I've often found that when I pray with people tears come into their eyes. I used to worry that I had offended them – but gradually I realised it was nothing to do with my words – rather it was God touching their lives and releasing them from whatever was holding and harming them and pouring his peace into their lives.

This morning we read part of a very special prayer. Jesus praying for us. He had already prayed for the disciples and now he prays for us - those who will believe through their message which has been passed down through the centuries. I'm sure we want to hear what is on the heart of Jesus for us. Two words reoccur – unity and glory.

The way Jesus described unity is highly significant. He wants our unity to replicate what he and the Father share. Whenever you look at Jesus you see the Father displayed. You can't separate them. Jesus is the exact representation of the Father's being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. But whenever we look at the church do we see Jesus displayed? How vital it is for our focus to be on Jesus – his life, death, ascension and love – so that then unity is possible. The problem is that we so often prefer to focus on our ways, our understanding, ourselves.

We want the glory – but as we look at Jesus we discover that glory comes through suffering, through a cross and humility and not self-exaltation. It was because Jesus humbled himself to the death on the cross that God highly exalted him and gave him the name which is above all names.

So how is this worked out in practise? How is Jesus' prayer answered? I think we see a glimpse of it in Paul's experience in Philippi.

There's a lot we could bring out from this reading. We could focus on the tragic misuse of a female slave who was kept because she earned a great deal of money for her owners. The spirit within her recognised something of a greater power within Paul and his companions. I found it hard to read that Paul only delivered her from this spirit because it had annoyed him for several days; had he not seen and recognised an abused woman who needed to experience the love and freedom of Jesus? Maybe we all lose our focus at times. But it was in the name of Jesus that deliverance came because you can't differentiate Jesus from the Most High God – the one whose name is above all names.

One thing that opposes the work of God, perhaps more than most, is an all-consuming desire to make money. I remember talking with a Polish Christian not long after the Berlin wall came time who feared for the church in Poland; he saw the threat of communism which they have survived as far less worrying than the greater and more subtle power of materialism. Having just spent a few days in China I was grieved to discover see many people now obsessed with making money,

having status symbols and becoming more individualistic. Maybe they are only copying the West – but it is the complete opposite to the Kingdom of God.

Having lost their ability to make money, this girl's owners turn violently against Paul and Silas, seize them, drag them to the magistrates and falsely accuse them. How were they throwing the city into uproar? By freeing a girl? Events then happened at an alarming rate – just had they had done with Jesus after he went out having prayed for the church. By midnight Paul and Silas are in the darkest place possible – stripped, beaten with rods, in the inner prison cell with their feet fastened in the stocks. You couldn't get anywhere more darker or more secure and initially it might have seen totally godless.

But God brings glory out of their humility. Amazingly we discover that they are praying and singing hymns to God. I don't think this means that they didn't feel the pain or the humiliation – but in spite of the pain they were going to keep their focus on God. They believed God was still in control.

God doesn't always answer prayers in this way – but that night something totally unexpected happened. There was such a violent earthquake that prisoner's chains became loose. But possibly even more amazing – none of the prisoners took advantage of the situation and ran!

However the jailor couldn't see what was going on; he was filled with fear and panic. If he had lost his prisoners then it would be his turn to be tortured and killed – so he might as well end it all now. He got his sword out ready when he hears a shout from Paul that he should not harm himself. Paul – that prisoner who never should have been put in prison in the first place – showing love for someone who no doubt had been a ruthless jailor.

The jailor brings light and falls, trembling before Paul and Silas. He asks desperately how he can get out of this mess. Unlikely to have been a deep theological question at that moment – but Paul's response points beyond the immediate to something of far greater importance. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ".

I know we often joke about the Sunday school answer to every question being "Jesus" – but maybe we sometimes forget that our faith is all about Jesus and his supremacy. The declaration of the early Christians was simply that Jesus Christ is Lord. There was no greater name or authority for them. Their faith wasn't about introducing new rules and customs but first and foremost acknowledging Jesus as Lord and then living a life that demonstrated that reality.

Paul spoke more to the jailor and his household and they responded with belief and acknowledgement of Jesus. Then another totally unexpected event occurred. Who had ever heard of jailor not just washing the wounds of his most high risk prisoners but setting a meal before them! And then even having the humility to be baptised by them. Once again God had turned a dark situation into one of glory! There was so much joy and celebration because they, he and his household, had come to believe in God – through Jesus Christ.

On the face of it Paul and the jailor couldn't have been more different – but now they were united – they had become one in Jesus and they overcame any prejudices they might have felt inclined to hold on to. Paul was to later write to the Galatian church (Galatians 3: 26-28) – "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." He could have added there is neither jailor nor prisoner...

And no doubt you noticed that other word that was repeated in Jesus' prayer – the word we come back to time and time again - love. When the world sees our acceptance of one another and our love for one another demonstrated in action as well as word then it will begin to know the immeasurable, inexhaustible love shared between the Father and Son which we participate in.

May the Holy Spirit who spreads abroad this love in our hearts help us to live out the reality of it every day. Amen

E. Blackmore