

Sunday May 29<sup>th</sup> 2022 Acts 16:16-34 / John 17:20-26

Prayer: May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory. Amen



I wonder if you have ever been a founding member of a group? Maybe it was a choir, a walking group, a craft group.... and in forming it you developed and shared together the initial vision for the group – its aims and objectives. Over time the group grew. Some of the first members left and others joined who didn't know or fully appreciate the vision but came with different ideas for its future direction. Yes – you wanted the group to

grow – but may be not with people who saw things differently from you! So would the group remain united or split?

So much of life is about coping with change (and people!). Habits and attitudes change. Priorities .... Things don't remain the same ... At the APCM we were told 29 people had joined our electoral roll in the past year although we lost 11. That was so encouraging and we'd love to see our church grow even more – but growth intrinsically brings change .... and change isn't always easy particularly as we're getting older as many of us like doing things the way we have always done them!



Jesus was very much aware of change. Our gospel reading is his heartfelt prayer for his disciples – but not just for the disciples that were with him but those who come to believe on him through their message – and 2000 years on that includes us! This prayer is placed in John's gospel just before Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion – and despite all that Jesus was facing his prayer focus was for those who would believe on him.

Within weeks Jesus would be leaving his disciples and they would be charged with sharing the message of God's love and his desire for relationship with all people. After Jesus ascended into heaven, they would grow rapidly, from a group of 12 disciples – to initially 120 believers meeting together, praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit to come. Then when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost – on that day alone their number would be increased by 3000 – and daily more and more would join them.

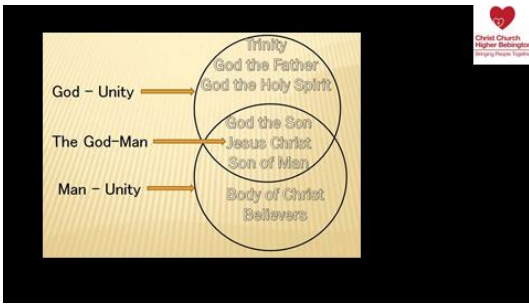
I don't think it had ever before struck me before what a challenge that would have been – particularly for relatively inexperienced disciples who had been good at arguing among themselves!

No wonder Jesus prayed for them and those who would come to faith – and I believe He is still praying for us today. What was the focus of his prayer? It was unity. There was so much scope for division, disagreements, different ideas and philosophies – which would be escalated even further when they began to reach out to non-Jews with their different customs and lifestyles.

Unity was so important – but why? The 3 reasons that stood out for me in this prayer on the importance of unity was because

- it is a reflection of the unity between the Father and son

- it demonstrates the glory that belongs to Jesus
- it illustrates to the world around the love of God

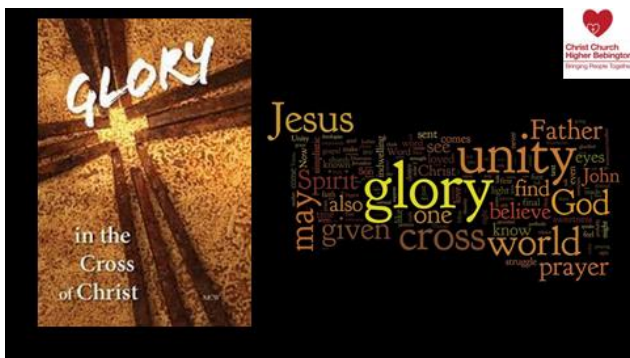


When I was searching for illustrations to go with what I'm saying I came across this one. You may or may not find it helpful – but I think it does emphasise how the unity between God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit overlaps with our unity with Jesus and with one another.

Let's think about the **unity between the Father and Son**. Whenever we look at Jesus we see what God is like – they

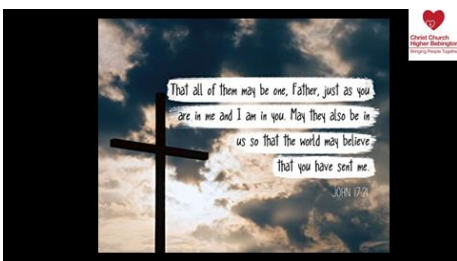
are indivisible. John in his gospel emphasises this repeatedly. When Philip asked Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father' Jesus' response was 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. I am in the Father, and the Father is in me?' You only have to see the works and hear the words of Jesus to know what the Father is like.

But that wasn't just a given – Jesus was in constant communication with the Father – seeking his will, praying, obeying. And so for us too, an essential requirement for our unity is that we, individually, are in constant communication with the Father; discovering his will and obeying his voice.



Unity **demonstrates the glory that belongs to Jesus**. So what does the word glory actually mean? Thank God for google! I found a choice of definitions for glory as a noun – firstly high renown or honour won by notable achievements or secondly magnificence and great beauty. Both are true of Jesus – but his notable achievement wasn't something that we would immediately relate to glory. It was dying an inhumane death on the cross so that

he could deal with all that was wrong in the world and restore our relationship with the Father. It meant becoming the lowest of the low. Jesus described his glory like a seed dying but through dying producing many more seeds. He spoke of the necessity for us to lay down our lives; to live sacrificially, to put aside your own desires for the benefit of others. Unity and glory require sacrifice – which is costly.



Unity among believers **illustrates to the world around the love of God and points to Jesus**. A couple of weeks ago we were looking at the **new** commandment Jesus gave to his disciples – to love one another. It was new because it raised the standard to the ultimate – loving as Jesus has loved us, not just to love others as we love ourselves. Jesus wanted everyone to know who his disciples were because of their outstanding love. It was to be their identity. Now Jesus prays that it might be so. Four times in these verses we read of love. Love is inseparable from unity. You can have uniformity through obeying rules but real unity is only achieved through love.

It starts with the love that God has for us which mirrors the love between Father and Son. It's an amazing, indescribable love, unconditional love. And it's that love that needs to be love expressed in our lives - in action; it's so much more than a feeling. When we really know the love of God in our lives then it begins to overflow to others. It's a love that isn't

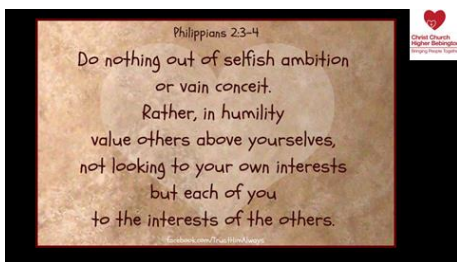
bounded by who we are naturally prepared to accept or easily get on with. It's a love that points back to its source which is God himself.

Each Sunday between Easter and Pentecost our second reading has been on the growth of the early church from the book of Acts. Last week and today we read about the formation of the church in Philippi. The first convert was Lydia – who appears to have been a wealthy business woman. Today we read of a slave woman – someone despised and abused – who may have come to faith - and then a jailer who probably had been pretty brutal - and his family. We probably wouldn't have wanted to form a church with so much diversity – but God brings them together – despite of their differences – and they become a group characterised by love. Lydia offers hospitality to Paul; the jailer amazingly washes the wounds of Paul and Silas and provides them with a meal

As time passes the group grows – others are added and not surprisingly there are frictions and disagreements. So Paul writes to them – and I'll finish with his words which focus on how we achieve unity.



If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.



Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Prayer: Lord Jesus you prayed that we may be one. Father you have loved us with an amazing, indescribable love, unconditional love. Holy Spirit, fills us with that love that we may show the unity that you enjoy. Amen

Rev E. Blackmore