

Easter 7 2010

Acts 16:16-34; Rev.22:12-14,16-17,20-22: John 17:20-26

‘Holy Father, I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.’ i.t.n.+....

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once remarked that the church is perhaps the only organisation that exists primarily for the benefit of those *who are not* its members. Those words from today’s Gospel, and indeed the overwhelming thrust of so much of Jesus’ farewell discourses and prayers in the Gospel of John, illustrate the same point.

But to follow the wranglings within the Anglican Church over the issue of women bishops, or over homosexuality, is often to see this vital, simple wish of Jesus - that love and unity should be at the heart of our life together – obscured and forgotten through in-fighting and lack of mutual respect. Similarly, the scandals of child abuse in the past hidden, and dismissed, by Roman Catholic Church authorities represents a betrayal of trust, true love and unity. The result of both of these has been, and remains, a discrediting of the Church throughout the world. It flies in the face of our Lord’s prayer to his heavenly Father that his disciples should all be one, so that ‘the world may believe that you have sent me’. Just a few weeks ago on Sunday morning we were reminded of his ‘new commandment’, from earlier in the discourses, that we ‘should love one another’ – so that all may know that we are his disciples.

This morning’s Gospel goes even further, and makes an audacious statement. Jesus, addressing God his Father, says: ‘The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one’. On Thursday we celebrated Ascension Day: the departure of the risen Jesus from this world to live for evermore with God, from whom he had come. However we envisage the Ascension, and however we understand terms like ‘Jesus in glory’, ‘sitting on the right of God’, the first disciples and apostles seem to have had a real sense of Jesus – who at his arrest and crucifixion had seemed defeated and shamed – now having triumphed and brought to an honour and glory which in some sense **they shared**. The things we see them do and say in the NT are not the sort of things we’d expect of people who are deluding themselves and making a pretence. They have a conviction and deep-seated confidence that doesn’t follow from mere wishful thinking.

I have a hunch that it’s this deep inner assurance that, at least in part, is what Jesus has in mind when he says that he has given to us - the community of his followers - the glory he himself has been given by God. It’s not easy to express this, but when I go to the English Lake District, the beauty of that mountainous sky-line fills me with joy – it does quite literally put a spring in my step, and a song in my heart! I’m sure we all have similar things which are in their own way glorious, and which when we enjoy them, their glory seems to rub-off onto us.

In today’s first reading from Acts, even before the earthquake which freed the prisoners, and the subsequent conversion and baptism of the jailer and his household, the imprisoned Paul, Silas, and his companions – having been publically flogged on a false charge – ‘were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to

them'. It was this strong assurance in their faith which paved the way for others to want what they had – faith generating faith, glory generating glory.

If all this seems some way from our experience of the church today, which seems torn-apart by division, and in which we sometimes feel, at local level, our personal wishes thwarted by others, let's remember Jesus' great prayer – **that we should all be one**, and remember, too, that he asked this not only on behalf of us, but *also of those who will believe in him through our word*. And if that just seems hopelessly idealistic, let's remember above all that the unity he wishes for us is not just the kind of coalition of political agendas we're witnessing in Westminster at present (although of course we must pray that this brings stability to our nation). It's nothing less than a prayer that we will be so drawn into the life and the will of God that we come to experience the same unity in love that's between Jesus the Son, and God his Father. After the departure of Jesus at the Ascension, the disciples were told to wait for the gift of his Holy Spirit – the 'Comforter', who would lead them into all truth, and we celebrate his gift of the Spirit to the church next week, at the Feast of Pentecost.

William Temple was right when he said that the church is perhaps the only organisation that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members. [This is a truth that should inform our Congregational meeting this coming week.] But like Paul, Silas and their 1st century companions, if we are willing, we can glimpse Christ's glory and share it with others by our example, and in acts of service, and we'll gain those fulfilling benefits for ourselves in the process.

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