

WGCURC:2.6.19

John 17.20-26

A brief prayer. Let us pray: Father, as we turn to your word, may your Spirit move amongst us, opening that word for each one of us. In the name of your Son. Amen.

So. Our reading this morning comes at the very end of the prayer which Jesus made to his Father before he went out to be crucified. And he prays for all -all who will ever believe in him. He prays for us. And in his prayer, he asks that we may be one. He prays that we may have perfect unity. Perfect unity.

This prayer is often quoted with a wry smile by church leaders from different denominations when they gather together. It's a wry smile because there is a sadness that we are not fully one. In a way I find this sadness surprising. It is quite to be expected that different people will like different forms of worship. So there will be one church which follows the King James' Bible and the old Anglican Prayer Book order of service and another which prefers to have a music group with drums and a key board and lively modern worship songs. But we all worship the same God, the same Lord Jesus Christ and we all try to be open to the guidance and power of the same Holy Spirit. And it is good that, here in Welwyn Garden City, leaders of different churches meet together regularly. And it is good that once a year in January, in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we all meet together for a joint service. The service ends with all the church leaders standing in a line at the front of the church to say the Grace together. I had the great privilege of joining that line this year to represent our congregation while Jane was on compassionate leave.

But one reason for the sadness is that we cannot all take communion together. I have been to two services in Roman Catholic Churches recently, one for the funeral of a loved friend and one to celebrate the 80th birthday of Sean Cox. Sean organises the Mixed Group Christmas lunch each year for people who are on their own. I could not receive communion, of course, but in both services the priest invited those who are not Roman Catholics to come up for a blessing and to show that they are doing this by crossing their arms across their chest. This gave rise to a rather amusing incident at the service for Sean Cox. The service was led very wonderfully by Father

Norbert Fernandes. Love seemed to pour out of his mouth in the way he spoke. There were two other priests there from different parts of Europe because Sean is a great traveller. One of the priests clearly spoke English less well than the other and I was in a line going up to him to receive my blessing. He was giving a round wafer of bread to those receiving communion. As my turn came to come up to him, I crossed my arms across my chest. The priest obviously did not know what to do with the wafer and was waving it in front of me. In that moment, it seemed to me that I had better take the wafer to get over his embarrassment. At that same time, he realised what was happening and mumbled a blessing. With Catherine, who came after me, he now understood and put his finger on her forehead and said, "Blessing".

As He often does, God used this unfortunate moment in a loving way. After the service, as people were leaving they came to the three priests on the wide flat area at the front of the church. Of course, everyone made a bee-line for Father Norbert. When he spoke to me, I started to describe what had happened and I suddenly realised that the priest from Europe was just behind me. So I turned and shook his hand and thanked him. He had up to then been standing apart and on his own and this drew him in.

I feel so blessed to be a member of a church which usually begins the communion service by saying that all who love the Lord Jesus Christ are welcome to take the bread and wine. And I have taken communion at services led by Roman Catholics. I believe it is allowed when you are far from one of your own churches. I once went on a Christian Meditation pilgrimage led by a wonderful Roman Catholic Servite monk. He made it clear that we could all take the bread and wine at our daily Mass if we wished to do so. I used to send him Christmas cards and on the last one I said how grateful I always was that he had given that invitation. He died shortly afterwards and my thanks must have been in his heart.

But the prayer of Jesus has a much deeper meaning than just Christians worshipping together. He prays that we may be one, just as he and his Father are one. "And he says, "I am in them and you are in me". I am in them. He is talking about his Spirit being in us, the Holy Spirit. Mike Findley was talking about the Spirit last week. As he said, it is one of the three aspects of our one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we will be thinking more about the Spirit next week when we remember the amazing, wonderful Day of Pentecost.

St. Paul takes up this idea of Jesus being in all of us when he says “We are the body of Christ” . We began our service by remembering that passage in our Call to Worship. When we pray for someone, when we help someone or when we are helped and give back a smile and thanks, we are letting the Spirit of Jesus work within us. We are opening ourselves to his love and sharing it with others. That is why Jesus says “I have given them the glory you gave me.” Jesus refers to his crucifixion as his “glory” because the most totally loving, self-giving anyone can do is to give his life for his friends. We may not be called on to give our lives in that way but we can give our lives in loving service of each other.

This reminds me of a conversation I once had with Father Norbert. I think it must have been a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity event here in our church, followed by a soup lunch. Father Norbert and I had been talking to people and found ourselves with only one place to sit - a small table for two. I asked him how he managed to give pastoral care to the two huge congregations for which he is priest. He thought for a moment and said, “I teach them to love and care for each other.” And then he added, “You can feel when a congregation care for each other.” That must have been what Jesus wanted when he taught his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you”. And this will indeed bring a real, loving unity. Amen