

JOHN 17:20-26  
 PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH

Do you fancy job as a pundit? Every sports' programme has at least one, if not three! All you have to do is sit on chair on *Match of the Day* or *Sportscence* and talk! You talk about the game you're about to watch; you talk about the game when it is half-way through; you talk about game that's finished and tell everyone else what happened and why. The pundit will tell you also what the result means for the team that won, for the team that lost and for the rest of the league. If you don't like football, then you will find the same in any sport: golf has its pundits, as does tennis and athletics. Most of them tend to be people who once played the sport and some of them played it to a higher standard than they can talk about it! If you don't like sport, then you find the same on political TV and radio: political pundits (or commentators) tell you what has happened in Westminster or Holyrood and they will tell you what it means for us, what is the significance of the day's business.

One of the pundit's tasks is to tell us what the player was thinking when he or she played way he or she did. "What was going on in his mind when he hit that shot? Or made that save? What was going on in his mind when he made that mistake that cost his team the match?" Or they are expected to tell you what was in the manager's mind – "why did he make that substitution and why make it when he made it?" The pundit has to read the player's mind, or the manager's mind! The political pundit is exactly same, except this time he has to read mind of the Prime Minister or the First Minister and tell us why they said what they said, or why they proposed certain courses of action; they are to talk about not just what has happened and what it means, but why it happened; what is going on in the minds of the politicians when they make these speeches. It is a thankless task, because as soon as one pundit gives us one explanation, another will come along with not only a different explanation, but one that totally contradicts. We don't know where we are!

In Church debates, the same thing goes on, except this time people try to read the mind of Jesus. Everyone wants to claim to be thinking in the way Jesus thought. On the most controversial subjects, of course, Jesus maybe said nothing, so we try to work out what Jesus might have said or might have thought about these issues so that we can claim to be people who walk with Jesus most faithfully. Well, that's partly true! The beauty of the gospels is that there are places where we don't need to guess. Jesus tells us what He thinks. What does Jesus think about the Church today? We have no need to guess – He tells us what He thinks and we need to listen! What are to be the church's priorities, according to Jesus? We have no real need to guess – Jesus tells us and we need to listen!

John 17 is a fantastic piece of Bible; it is the end of Jesus' time in the Upper Room with His disciples on the night before He died and it is recorded only by John. The whole chapter is Jesus praying and laying bare His soul before His Father. What does Jesus think about Himself and what is about to happen? What does Jesus think about his disciples and their future? What does Jesus think about the Church that will come after Him? There are some answers to all of these questions in John 17; we read only the last part of it, but we need to reflect something of it all. The theme that runs through the whole prayer is connection: Jesus is connected with the Father, with a deep sense of unity in the Father and the Son; there is a need for the disciples, for the church, to be

connected with Jesus and to be connected with one another. Something of our connections with one another show Jesus and His love to the world.

Jesus is about to put on His coat and go out into Jerusalem night to go to the cross. In what frame of mind does Jesus go? There are all kinds of speculation that we might make to try to answer that question, but here's Jesus prayer for Himself. "*Father...*" (*John 17:1*) This was the time for which Jesus has come into the world; He is not shying away from the cross, but going out to do the will of God; going out to complete the plan that God has had from beginning, that Jesus should die for sin of the world. The cross is a place of shame and humiliation and pain, yet Jesus' prayer is that what He is about to do should bring glory and honour to the Father and the Son because Jesus is the Saviour of the world and people will trust Him and praise God for gift of His Son. The Father's glory and the Son's glory are completely tied up together: the Son will be glorified for His death and resurrection and the Father will be glorified by the Son's obedience and sacrifice. Jesus goes out to do God's will.

Then we listen to Him pray for the Church (we'll come back to the disciples in a moment!). What is His big concern for the Church? "*I pray...*" (*John 17:20f*) "*May they...*" (*17:23*) Unity! The Church may be one. There is to be, about the Church, a sense of oneness and unity; this is Jesus' prayer for His Church. Look at what we know of the Church: we are all different, individuals with different personalities, with different stories of life, different experiences of faith. A couple of weeks ago we spoke about Jesus' command to love one another and we said then that this love is to be shaped by the cross because we are to love one another as He has loved us! There are all sorts of expressions of Church that we call denominations, which are organised in different ways, with different styles of worship and different ways of doing things. Within denominations, there are different views, different understandings of the Bible and the gospel. Yet, Jesus prays for the unity of His Church, that we might be one.

Jesus' prayer is not for the creation of some super-Church that embraces every Christian across the whole world. Jesus' prayer is much more to do with the attitude that lives in Christian hearts and minds towards one another. It is possible to disagree with someone yet still love them as a brother or sister in Christ. Jesus' prayer is much more to do with our attitudes to one another as Christians, that we have in our hearts a deep sense of love for one another and connectedness to one another. We are all connected to one another by virtue of our Christian faith; Jesus has done the same thing in all of us. Our connectedness is to show the world the love that Jesus has for the world. By our divisions and conflicts and fallings-out as Christians with one another, we have hidden the love that Jesus has for the world and we need to repent of our sins! More than that, our sense of connectedness and oneness is to reflect the connectedness and oneness that exists between the Father and the Son; we are to show the world what God is like and that too we have failed to do by our bitter arguments and divisiveness!

This is not unity at any price. There is a desire for unity that drives us to lowest common place of agreement, but that is not what Jesus wants. There are three prayers in the middle part of this prayer, prayers for Jesus' disciples that also show us something of the qualities that Jesus wants to see in His Church. "*Sanctify...*" (*John 17:17f*) There are three kinds of Church that Jesus wants His disciples to be:

**1. Holy** – this is one of these Bible words that we meet so often, but are not always sure what it means; it is about being 'set apart', being God's people, in the world but not of the world. That carries with it something about the kind of life we are to live. We are to

be people ready to do the will of God and be the kind of people who reflect something of Jesus in way we think, speak and behave.

**2. Truth** – do any of you sail? If you do, you'll understand the idea of moorings. Your boat's moorings are the place where you tie up for the night; or the place where you leave the boat over the winter. It is all about giving the boat a safe, secure place. Where are the Church's moorings? How do we find the Church's moorings? The answer ultimately is in our connection with Jesus and we find that mooring by the truth that we find in the Bible. The Church is not free to throw off the truth as the Bible reveals it to us; if we throw off the truth from the Bible, we throw off our moorings and we will drift aimlessly through the world until we simply fade away into the background. If we throw off the truth and our moorings, we will lose the sense of being holy people.

**3. Mission** – Jesus sent His disciples into the world in the same way that God sent Jesus. They were sent to make disciples; they were men on a mission to tell the stories of Jesus so that people would hear and believe. They spent the rest of their lives being people on a mission and seeing people's lives change as they encountered Jesus in these stories.

For a while there was a fashion among Christian young people to wear bracelets with WWJD on them. WWJD = What would Jesus do? These bracelets showed a desire to learn from Jesus and want to be like Jesus; they say "we would be people who want to be like Jesus". What would Jesus do for His Church today? That is not hard to discover! He would pray for the Church; indeed He is praying for the Church. He prays for us, asking the Father to give us mercy and grace, individually and as a church. Pray for the Church: if ever the Church in Scotland needed people to pray it is these next two weeks. Pray for the General Assembly and the ministers and elders who will be there from next Saturday, including me and our Session Clerk; pray for us that we make the right choices and decisions; pray for the church not to completely throw away its moorings; pray for a sense of unity in the Church in the face of some of most divisive issues we might face. Pray for the Church, for our unity as a Church, for our unity as a congregation and for the Church to be what Jesus wants us to be.

Be what Jesus wants us to be. There are choices here for us all of time. We can choose to act in way that promotes the unity of the Church, or to act in way that promotes division – what we say, does that foster a sense of unity and connectedness and love amongst my fellow Christians or does it foster a sense of suspicion and division? We all have that choice to make and many times every week! We can choose to live in a way that is holy, being distinctive as a Christian, putting into practice the values and standards of Jesus; or we can choose to go the way the world goes and live by a very different set of values. We can choose to read the Bible and believe the truth that it teaches; or we can choose to ignore the Bible and any sense of truth and believe whatever we like. We can choose to be outward-looking, taking the mission of the Church seriously or simply ignore our mission and keep the gospel to ourselves. This not just some academic exercise in understanding the Church; this is a challenge for all of us – what kind of Christians will we be?

You don't need to be a pundit! Jesus tells us what He thinks; He tells us what kind of Church we should be: to be one, with a sense of unity and connectedness – just as the Father and Son are connected and we are connected to Jesus, so we should be connected with one another. He want us to be holy people, anchored in the truth, sent into the world to tell about, and show people, Jesus. This is what Jesus wants!