

What does Jesus want for us?

(Preached by Cheryl Williams f@ Footscray Baptist Church, May 21st, 2023 - John 17:1-11)

For almost one hundred and forty years this church has thrown open its doors to people of all walks of life. Young and old. Men and women. Rich and poor. Educated and illiterate. Professionals and labourers. Immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. People of different cultures. People with different sexual preferences. People of different opinions and understandings of the gospel. This is what forms the rich tapestry that is Footscray Baptist Church, this is what forms the rich tapestry of the Christian church.

In our reading today Jesus prays for just such unity.

There is much to notice in this reading.

First, that Jesus prays. He adopts the usual pose for praying in Jewish culture, lifting his eyes towards the heavens. Secondly, after he prays for himself, he prays for his disciples. And by extension prays for us.

This prayer, of which we have the first part, is sometimes called the high priestly prayer. It is not the prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray, the one we call the Lord's prayer. This is different, here Jesus is interceding for us. Here, Jesus is not just praying about the present but the future.

The disciples are listening to his final words, before he is arrested and crucified, but that suffering and pain is not his focus. Last week we thought about his words that he would not leave us orphaned, alone. Again, I think Jesus is thinking about the impact that his leaving will have on them. Perhaps he worries that when he is not physically present that they will become divided, that they will disband, that they will change their focus, that they will scatter. So, he reminds them of a couple of things.

First, that eternal life is not a time or place, it is a relationship. It is by knowing and believing in Jesus as the one Sent by God that will give them eternal life, life in all its fulness. Secondly, he reminds them that as believers, they belong to God.

Thirdly, as he prays, he asks God for God's protection. He knows that whatever is next, it will be difficult, and they may lose hope and give up. So, he asks God to look out for them, to watch over them.

Finally, he prays that they may be unified, that they may stick together through thick and then, that they will be one. He reminds them that this is the kind of relationship that exists between God the Father and God the Son. They know each other inside out, they reveal each other to themselves and to the world, they have the same goal and purpose. This kind of oneness is what Jesus has been trying to build all along, this is community.

Jesus prays for unity and not just for unity's sake. The goal of such unity is that the world might know the love and oneness of God. The goal is to make known the Father, who so loved the world, that he sent his Son into it. The goal is to reveal the love that lies behind the sending of the Son - GOD!

The love that drives the life and mission of Jesus is the very same love that unites the disciples. The mutual love and abiding of the Father and the Son is to be shown to one another as the disciples reflect the love of God who is both Father and Son.

At the very heart of Jesus' prayer for us, indeed at the very heart of the gospel is a call to unity, to oneness, to reconciliation. It is not however a call to uniformity and sameness (how boring would that be!), but rather a call to mutuality and respect.

Unity is as much about how we disagree as it is about how we agree. It is as much about how we love as who we love. It is about mutual respect, understanding and acceptance. It is about breaking down barriers, so all are included. It is about not allowing race or culture, gender or sexuality, status or privilege, to divide. It is about offering and seeking forgiveness. All of this, Jesus modelled in this life.

Jesus knew and we do too, that such unity is needed in many places in the world.

- Families that are torn apart by conflict
- Countries that are torn apart by conflict
- The Christian church torn apart over different understandings of baptism, communion and sexuality
- This country's people – black and white (especially as we approach 'Sorry Day', a day we still need to mark because we are not reconciled), immigrant and those who have been here for a couple of hundred years, asylum seekers and those who arrived 'legally'.

Jesus prayed for such divisions to stop. Jesus prays for unity, for oneness. Jesus prays for mutuality, for reconciliation. Jesus prays for us to respect and honour others, to not walk past the pain of another, to offer each the dignity they deserve. Jesus prays for us to get on with the main game – sharing and showing God's love for the whole world.

We are called to live out Jesus' prayer. To recognise the other as a fellow human being, a person. To listen with an open heart rather than judge another. To work for justice for another, to treat another with dignity.

Living in unity will be a celebration, life will be full of colour, we will learn from each other, we and the whole world will be swept up in the love that is God. Amen.