



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church July 27, 2014

John 17: 20-26

At first read, the passage from John appears to offer exactly what we would like to hear on this anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia. Jesus prays to the Father that all his followers will be one. Here's our justification for combining into one denomination 37 years ago and our justification for continuing to join in conversations with other denominations about further union. Those who chose the lections for today have done a good job in some sort of self-congratulation. However, there is something much more important to overhear in Jesus prayer to the Father. Something that speaks to each of us in how we behave as the children of God and followers of Christ. This is not about physical or organisational union of denominations. Jesus' prayer is that we be one as he and the Father are one. One in purpose, one in will and one in respect and cooperation, despite being different. Jesus is praying for a unity in love and Christ that makes God known.

At the risk of undermining many fine sermons on the Trinity, it has to be pointed out that Jesus and God are different! The Father and the Son are different, very obviously here, where Jesus is praying to the Father and not talking to himself. They are different and yet united. The Father is the Father through there being a Son and the Son is the Son to the Father. As one scholar puts it, they are "inseparably united in differentiation from each other." They are united in the great purpose of not just making the love of God known in the world – Jesus is more than a prophet – but in making Jesus known as the very expression of that love. A purpose made clear in the cross; what John declares as the glory. Jesus keeps returning to this point in the prayer; that the world may know and believe. One in purpose although different. That is prayer for the those who believe; that they be one as the father and the Son are one.

One of the criticisms of our faith is that 'THE CHURCH' silenced all the other voices and opinions about Jesus – the alternative Gospels like Thomas and Mary and Peter – and established the idea of the divine, sinless, resurrected Jesus. The problem with that view is that there was no "THE CHURCH" in the early centuries. There was a number of expressions of the faith, churches, in a number of places. The New Testament has 4

Gospels expressing different emphases and themes, depending on scholarship there are between 6 and 12 writers of the Epistles and Revelation, all with differing emphases and issues and themes. When John gives us Jesus prayer that the believers will be one, he does so in the knowledge that he is writing to one community among many. It is thought that he had a copy of Mark's Gospel and yet he gives us a picture of Jesus quite different to Mark's. Earlier in this section of Jesus final words to the disciples he speaks of the Father's house having many dwelling places – many different ways of abiding in relationship with Jesus and God. The criticism of one Gospel and one official church line gives little credence to the differences that are in scripture. And yet all those differences are in union in pointing to something special; that in Jesus God was doing something for the reconciliation of God and the world. Though you can see the differences between Mark and John, Paul and James, Peter and Jude, they are in union in making the love of God in Jesus Christ known. They are one in purpose although different.

That union, that oneness, serves as a witness to the world. We are different but we welcome each other and express the same love of God and live out that love for each other. We see in the various different writings in the Gospels, welcome for rich and poor alike in the communities, welcome for visiting prophets and preachers, and in Paul's letters greetings form one community to another. The hard part of hearing this prayer is how poorly we have lived out that call to unity and oneness in the life of the church through the generations and how poorly that has witnessed the love of God to the world. The legacy of the Reformation was not a unity in difference but acrimony that declared to the world that we were different religions!

I grew up in a working class, suburban Methodist church, I knew nothing of Lent, or incense, mostly because the Catholic church I walked past on the way to my own was a foreign, unwelcoming place. I welcomed the inauguration of the Uniting Church, and with it access to the traditions of the church universal such as Lent and ancient hymns like the Te Deum; but even more I welcome the new found unity with Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican communities, where we can meet and share in prayer to and through the one Jesus Christ and the Father. The physical and organisational union is worth celebrating, but how much more is declared to the world when the different denominations can gather and worship together and work together in mission.

We overhear, in John's Gospel, Jesus pray that all believers will be one, as he and the Father are one. This is a prayer for God's action and not an instruction to the disciples. There is here the unspoken work of the Spirit. Jesus didn't say to the disciples "When I am gone make sure you all work together to make the one gospel of God's love known". In the Spirit, the disciples became apostles of the gospel of God's love. In the minds of the church at Jerusalem, Paul was a bit of a problem, off doing and saying different things;

in the Spirit they saw the work of the one God when they met together and heard Paul. And so it comes to us to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit in seeing beyond our differences to the unity of purpose in making God's love in Jesus known to the world. To allow the Spirit to open our eyes to the work of the Spirit in others. Just as I was raised to see differences and issues with Catholics, so I have experienced people looking down on my expression of the faith. Being told that I was not a real Christian because I couldn't name the day, hour and minute of my conversion, or because I wasn't really baptised. Being united in differentiation, as the Father and the Son are, requires us to look with the eyes of faith in the Spirit and not with our poor eyes of denominational difference. Here is the message in Jesus prayer; allowing God to do the work of uniting us in the purpose of making the love of God in Jesus Christ. A purpose beyond physical union that speaks to us all in how we live out our life in this time beyond Christendom when the world needs to know that we are not in competition; that we are different facets, or different expressions, of faith in the one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be one in purpose although different in expression.