

Sermon – Easter 7 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

John 17: 20-26

As we approach the annual day of Pentecost celebrations we are reminded of the care that Jesus took to prepare his disciples for the life that was to come for them after Jesus' ascension. The three years that Jesus spent with his closest friends was filled with his concern for them. He drew them in close so that he could teach them about a new way to live, a way that was shaped not only by Jewish Law, but also by love for God and for their neighbors.

Jesus taught his disciples by encouragement, example, parable and prayer. The passage we just heard from the gospel according to John is a section of Jesus final prayer for his disciples, and importantly, for all those that the disciples would minister to. Jesus prayer to his Father was not a silent prayer as he so often encouraged people to do – “When you pray go into a room and close the door.” This prayer was prayed aloud so that all his disciples would hear what he was saying.

Jesus knew he was soon to face significant trial, violence and death. It was imperative that the disciples knew that this was a part of God’s unfolding plan for the world. It was also imperative that the disciples knew that they were a crucial part of God’s unfolding plan for the world and that their reaction to it was not to be retribution, rather it was to be love, justice and peace.

It was also imperative that the disciples knew that they were to be a crucial part of God’s revelation that was perpetually unfolding in their midst. Jesus needed them to understand the part they were to play in the continued ministry of Jesus in the world. He reassured them that they were not to be left alone and that an advocate, a comforter was to be sent for them.

In the section of Jesus’ prayer that we have today we hear how concerned Jesus was that the disciples knew that they were already bound into the person of Jesus Christ and his heavenly Father. As Jesus and the father were one, so now the disciples were also to be included in this intimate relationship. His emphasis was on unification and mutual participation in the call God was making of them. That call was to go out into the world and make disciples of all the nations.

Each person that they would encounter in their ministry was also included in Jesus prayer. Those that would come to believe in Jesus through the ministry of the disciples was also to be bound into the love of God through his son Jesus Christ. There is almost a Trinitarian overtone to this prayer. “You, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Love within this relationship is the basis for their future ministry.

This all happened before Jesus died upon that tree. For us that live in the post resurrection and ascension world, we draw the same comfort from these reassuring words from Jesus prayer. When we say yes to the call of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, and seek a life that puts Jesus and his teachings at the center of our life, we are assured that the very essence of Jesus is within us.

The Holy Spirit works through each of us to continually draw us into this mutual relationship with the triune God, which in turn draws us into relationship with each other. The essence of the

church is mutual relationship and self-giving. Christ is the head and we are the body. Christ stands forever in the posture of self-giving, giving his love to anyone open to receive it, no matter what is happening in your life. We, who have accepted Jesus self-giving love, are the conduits and connectors for those that are seeking it.

St Teresa of Avila wrote about what it means to be in this relationship with Christ. St Teresa was a 16th century Spanish noblewoman who chose to live a monastic life as a Carmelite nun. She was a mystic and contemplative and the author of a significant body of spiritual writings especially her book *The Interior Castle*. St Teresa says of our life that each disciple is a part of Christ's body on earth. His witness is conducted through our limbs and his preaching through our mouths. His love is known through our work of mercy and the quality of our common life. The Church itself is a sacrament for the salvation of the world.

St Teresa's sentiments beautifully illustrate the significance we play as part of the body of Jesus Christ, and the responsibility we have to be an example of his love in the world.

We can reflect on two examples of people witnessing as the body of Christ. First, we have Paul and Silas, and second the testimony of a doctor I met in 2009.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard earlier give us a very clear example of what it means to give witness to Jesus through our limbs, our mouths and our work of mercy. The apostles Paul and Silas found themselves in a very difficult predicament in Macedonia. When they witnessed a young slave, possessed by a demon, being exploited by her owners they stepped in to cure her. Their action of mercy and love for the slave girl resulted in economic loss for her master. For their actions they were captured, beaten and jailed.

As they sat in their cells late one night, an earthquake struck that resulted in their shackles being freed from the walls of the jail. Most people would have ran, aiming to get as far from the jail as possible before day break. But Paul and Silas, and the unnamed others did not run. They stayed. When the jailer realized that his captives might have fled he was ready to take his own life, because he must have known that his failure would result in his death. (I couldn't help but think as I read this passage about the North Korean nuclear disarmament negotiators that were executed after failing to convince President Trump to reduce the economic sanctions during their last summit)

As the jailer is about to kill himself, Paul speaks up to assure him that they were still there. This very act of mercy saves the man's life, and very likely also saves his family's lives, and the lives of the other prison guards. The jailer was transformed. He might have gained some understanding of Jesus if he had overheard Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns, which was another witness they gave that night. This brave and loving act of Paul overwhelmed the guard who fell at Paul's feet. There he asked him how he could be saved.

In response to the guards yearning for salvation Paul and Silas retire to his house where they have their wounds tendered to. Paul gave verbal testimony to Jesus Christ, and how no doubt that he was the body of Jesus, acting out his love in the world. After their baptism, the man's heart is opened and he celebrates with an act of hospitality. Joy filled that house that night, but

grief could have been there instead. Their lives were changed because Paul stayed and gave witness to Jesus Christ.

The second example I heard about in 2009 when I met a doctor from Pakistan at my old church in Sydney. A women in our congregation had been a missionary in Pakistan many years before. She had befriended a number of Christian families and kept in contact with them when she returned to Australia. The son of one of her friends became a doctor.

Dr Reginald Zahiruddin, was the medical superintendent of Pennell Memorial Christian Hospital in Bannu, Pakistan. He had been working in the area for some 25 years and was well known. Pakistan had been fighting militant Islamists for some time and the region in which he worked was quite unsafe. One day on his weekly field trip to care for poor patients, he and his driver were kidnapped.

Blindfolded, they were driven to a secure location many hours from their homes. They were threatened with death if they made any noise. When they reached the captors hold out they were shackled and held in a small stuffy room. Every day, four times a day, a Muslim cleric would come into the cell, read from the Quran, play Islamic songs and try and convert the doctor and his driver. His captors wanted him to change his clothes to the traditional Pakistani wear. They threatened him by telling him they would slit his throat if he didn't convert.

When I met Reginald he told us that during all of this time he was praying that the Holy Spirit would guide him and put every word on his lips that would give witness to the love and peace of Jesus. He told his captors that he would not convert because only God, that had given him life, had the power to take it away.

Some 20 days later, in a surprise move, he and his driver were released, back in Bannu where his hospital was. His witness to Jesus love that drove his deep faith, along with his Christian friends appeals to the militant's to release him so he could continue his humanitarian work in the area, worked in unison to save the two of them.

Dr Reginald said of his time in captivity that it gave him a chance to really pray and to see God's provision in a new way. He recounted that during one long night he had seen a vision of a circle of light containing many unfamiliar faces. He said that he felt it was God's way of reassuring him that many people throughout the world were praying for him.

As we know from news reports many others kidnapped by militants were not so fortunate. Dr Reginald's witness to our small group in Sydney has stayed with me these past 10 years and has informed my faith and witness. I was moved by just how powerful the work of the Holy Spirit can be when we find ourselves in difficult situations.

These are two of many examples of the impact of the early Christians on the world around them when they act from their knowledge and love of God, rather than as people of the world about them. These stories come to us to encourage us to follow the same path and to really see ourselves as an extension of Jesus Christ living in this world.

Christians give witness to their faith in many places every day. Sometimes it's a small act of love and other times it is a bolder act.

The Spirit of Jesus Christ empowers us as members of the body of Christ, giving witness to him in this world. We are to stand in a posture of self-giving, knowing that we stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ in this powerful mutual relationship. We are the limbs, mouth and heart of Jesus in this world. Giving witness to Jesus is a big responsibility we share, but we do it knowing we are standing with God and Jesus Christ, and each other, as one.

Amen