

John 17:20-26 – Easter Love

Setting the context

Four years ago this coming October [Oct 2012], my dad died, my mum having died three years before that [April 2009]. My uncle (my dad's brother) and I were named as executors in his will and it was our job to ensure that the things my dad left behind in this world were distributed in accordance with his wishes.

Jesus is about to leave this world and return to the Father. He also has a legacy to bequeath to those he loves. The difference with Jesus is that he can do what no other human being can do: he is his own executor. He is the one who not only died that we might receive the promised inheritance, he also rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven (as we remembered this week) and is even now at work in the courts of heaven ensuring that we receive all that he has promised us.

And in this wonderful chapter of John's Gospel, we see exactly what Jesus wants to give his people.

The setting is just after the Last Supper in which Jesus has shown his disciples that he is about to demonstrate the extent of his love for them by laying down his life for them. Now, just before he faces the awful ordeal of trial and crucifixion, Jesus prays this prayer – a prayer that falls into three parts:

Firstly, Jesus prays for himself (vv1-5) – that, having done all that the Father sent him to do, he will now be received back into glory.

Secondly, Jesus prays for the eleven remaining disciples who will soon abandon him and flee (vv. 6-19) – that they might be kept from the power of the evil one by the word that he has spoken to them. As the Father sent him into the world, he is now sending them out into the world to continue his mission – the mission of making known to the world the love of God, the heart of God, the purpose of God. Jesus prays that these disciples might be kept faithful and true to their calling to go out in his name.

And then thirdly, Jesus prays for all who will come to believe through their testimony (vv. 20-26). In these last verses of the chapter, Jesus prays not only for the next generation of believers, those who will believe by hearing the preaching of those who had been with Jesus; he prays also for those who will believe through their testimony and the continuing testimony of believers down the ages. He prays for us. And it is these verses that I want us to look at this morning.

John 17:20-26

In these verses, Jesus prays for us. This is his Last Will and Testament for us. And just as he prayed these words shortly before his arrest and death, so, as ascended Lord, he continues to pray these things for us now in the courts of heaven. This is what he wants for us and, as executor of his own will, this is what he is determined to empower us to be and to do.

What is it then that he prays for us?

He prays that we may be one so that the world may believe that Jesus whom we love and serve is Saviour and Lord of the whole world. Division and conflict among Christians creates a barrier against our message to the world – we know it. So also the opposite is true, unity, the type of unity which Jesus is speaking of here, empowers our testimony and mission and brings blessing to the world.

But what is this unity for which Jesus prays? He prays that just as he and the Father are one – as the Father is in him and he is in the Father – so also we should be one.

The Trinity is a great mystery. How can our minds begin to understand the relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? It is, in a very real sense, beyond our comprehension. But we know this: they share a common life, a common heart, a common passion and a common purpose. They are bound together in a love that passes all understanding – there is no conflict between them. And from that relationship which they have with each other, they work together to a common end.

And what we understand from these verses is that this relationship that they have with each other, though it is a unique relationship, it is not an exclusive relationship. The love which the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father is also a love which Father and Son have for all who will come to God through Jesus. The Father loves us as he has loved his only begotten Son. Jesus loves us as the Father has loved him. This love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit – we are included in the embrace of this love. And, by God's grace and the Spirit's enabling, we love the Father and we love Jesus with a reflection of his love for us.

Isn't that wonderful beyond words?

But there is more here. Father and Son are united in heart and in purpose. Jesus prays that we will be united in heart and purpose. And that purpose around which we are to be united is the very purpose for which the Father sent the Son into the world; the very purpose for which those first disciples were being sent out into the world. It is the purpose of making God known and drawing the world back to God through Christ. This is what preoccupies the heart of God.

This is what Jesus prays for us. He prays for our unity. Not that we may always see things in exactly the same way. Not that we should pretend that we are all exactly the same. But that, despite our many differences, backgrounds and experiences, we might share a common life – Christ in us and we in him. And that we might share a common heart and purpose: a common passion – that the earth might be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea; a common aim – to make Christ known.

And the wonderful thing in these verses is that Jesus, who is about to return to glory, promises to share his glory with his disciples – with us. He gives us his glory that we may be one (vv. 22-23). He comes to dwell in us and among us that we may share in his life, and so share in his mission. He is with us as executor of his own will to ensure that all he has bequeathed to us shall be ours and that his desire for the world might be fulfilled.

Now think what this means: the glory of the living God which appeared to Moses in the burning bush; the glory of the living God which shone from Jesus when he was transfigured before the three disciples; the glory of God that was displayed in the cross – *this glory* Jesus wants to be in us also. He wants his life and glory to be manifest in our shared lives as we love one another as Christ has loved us and work together with a shared passion and purpose to make God known. It is the glory of Christ in us which is to be the centre of our unity, melting divisions and setting us on fire for him.

A community of disciples who know how much God has loved them, who are united in love for one another and with a passion that reflects that of God's love for us and who love a world that does not yet know him will be a powerful witness to the world in making Christ known.

I count it a considerable privilege that for the last seventeen-and-a-half years I have worked for Bible Society. We are a mission agency, I believe, like none other. One of more than 150 sister Bible Societies around the world, we work together to bring the word of God to the world: we want to make God known. And at Bible Society in Swindon, where I have worked, there are people of many different backgrounds, experiences and denominations – and even more so in the various Bible Societies around the world – but we are united in a common purpose and aim: united in working to bring the word of God to people of every language tribe and tongue – that the earth may be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. We work with a common heart and common purpose with and a real, if sometimes tested, love for one another.

And this is what Christ calls us to be: to be united in him; to love one another as he has loved us; to be filled with the glory of his presence and his purpose; to continue his mission in the world.

But there is also something more: Jesus promises to give even more of his glory to us v.24. Just think what this means! The glory displayed now in the community of God's people is but a foretaste of even greater glory to come. The love which God's people share now with one another is but a foretaste of a greater experience of God's love which Christ will give us at his coming – when we will know even as we are known. Already we experience the embrace of the love of the Triune God but then we shall experience it in all its fullness. What glory that will be. And this is God's purpose for *all* that he has been made, that the whole of creation might be brought within the embrace of his love.

So this is the will of Christ for us and his calling upon our lives, vv.25-26. His purpose is the conquest of an angry and rebellious world through the power of sacrificial, self-giving love. And this is to be our mission – if we can only choose to accept it. It is our calling, and one for which Christ promises to equip us. He calls us to be united in love for God and in a common purpose: that the love of God that we have come to know in Christ might be known by all the world.

This is the prayer of Christ – his prayer now as much as it is his prayer in John 17;

This is why he came;

This is the mission that he now bequeaths to us.

Peter Misselbrook

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