

# Seventh Sunday of Easter

29.05.2022  
By Jonny Clark

## Introduction

Today's text is a well known part of a monologue of Jesus that lasts three chapters in the Gospel of John. It appears in John's account days before the crucifixion, so can almost be understood as being close to the last words of Jesus, or certainly the last instructions. As we read this passage we are considering the intimate life of Jesus and his Father and we are somehow also connecting that divine life to our own lives as those who follow Christ today.

Conflict in this passage is almost assumed: Jesus prays that we would be one, the assumption perhaps being that we will often not be one. There will be disputes; they can be seen in various places in the book of Acts and in Church History.

One of the questions I am left asking when reading this text is, how can we be one with those we so strongly disagree with? This is a large question. It involves justice and solidarity for the oppressed which is also a prevalent biblical principle. If unity demands I join myself to those who would deny justice to someone who is oppressed or marginalised, then what value is unity?

In this passage we are brought into Jesus' yearning that the life of his followers would imitate in some ways the perichoresis of the Trinity. The early ecumenist Fr Paul Couturier wrote a prayer that was translated into English from French by Fr Gerry Reynolds (whom I reference in my extended comment below). This prayer for Christian unity includes the line "make us feel intense sorrow over the infidelity of our disunity". I have always found this compelling.

The prayer of Jesus in the text is for oneness among Jesus' followers. Perhaps Jesus' life and ministry also would have us realise that he was always seeking to find a space for those who were not included. Maybe then, we need to ask how we can build a unity if we are barring those we deem unworthy.

---

## Text

John 17:20-26

"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know

that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.”

---

## Comment

I have seen and lived near a fair few dividing lines. I remember driving past the Green Line in Beirut during a month-long visit there in 2001. At the time, it was a small area which consisted of the remains of several buildings riddled with more bullet holes than you could imagine. It was one of the last few vestiges of Lebanon's tragic civil war. I remember visiting Israel and the Palestinian Territories for the first time in 2003 and seeing the building of what would become the separation wall. I saw women climbing over the rubble carrying bags of shopping, knowing that in a few weeks the wall would be considerably higher, and untraversable on foot. In Belfast I lived for eight years next to one of the many peace walls that sit like a daunting symbol of being shunned, straddling streets, parks, and neighbourhoods. I've walked across the bridge in Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Muslim side towards the Catholic side. These kinds of man-made lines or walls are symbols of the potential for humanity to allow the “them and us” spirit to be animated in the building of separation barriers between us.

As we read today's text, we should recognise the potential for the kind of unity which finds its galvanising force for oneness in a hatred of the other side. This is the unity of the mob, the crowd baying for vengeance on the scapegoat. Perhaps the unity this text calls for is of a type that is always open to those outside the circle: an ubuntu unity that realises the circle is only complete when the excluded are welcomed and belong.

Jesus prays that his followers then and in the future “would be one”. This has always struck me as a beautiful sentiment, yet it has never seemed harder to imagine than now. I write this piece at a time of unprecedented polarisation. Social media algorithms, like ghosts, have scared people to run into extreme echo chambers, clamouring to build walls and escape the toxins of the other side in the culture wars. What we are witnessing in many societies is an inexorable and instinctive slide into dehumanising and demonising those we oppose. This extreme othering of those created in God's image seems to be a special kind of evil. Currently doing the rounds is a video of a preacher saying it's impossible to be a Christian and vote for the other side. He then says “get out you demon” to any supporter of that political party in his church. It's mob-mentality unity of the worst kind.

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf put it like this: “Sin is here the kind of purity that wants the world cleansed of the other rather than the heart cleansed of the evil that drives people out by calling those who are clean “unclean” and refusing to help make clean those who are unclean.”

In a sense, these words from Jesus are bringing us full circle from the Levitical codes that mandated the separating of people who were ceremonially unclean from those who were clean. Jesus, in his ministry and in this prayer, shows his desire to reach out, touch, and be one with all, whether they are unclean or not. In a sense Jesus shows that when he touches someone unclean, he does not become unclean, rather they become clean?

Richard Beck writes: “Specifically, how are we to draw the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in the life of the church? Sacrifice —the purity impulse— marks off a zone of holiness, admitting the “clean” and expelling the “unclean.” Mercy, by contrast, crosses those purity boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, bringing clean and unclean into contact. Thus, the tension. One impulse —holiness and purity— erects boundaries, while the other impulse —mercy and hospitality— crosses and ignores those boundaries.”

The Gospel text begs the question to us today: how do we live a life free of dividing lines that violently separate? The former Corrymeela leader Dr Inderjit Bhogal recently said to a group visiting the Corrymeela centre in Ballycastle: “I like boundaries. I don't like borders. Borders are put in place to protect the strong from

the weak. Boundaries are put in place to protect the weak from the strong”.

In John 17, Jesus proceeds to pray these words: “the glory you have given me I have given them”. What is this kind of glory?

In conversation with my friend and Greek scholar, Bruce Clark, I came across a few thoughts on the word glory, in biblical use. The word glory used in this text would be the Greek word “doxa”. It would be the equivalent of the Hebrew word “kabod” found in a passage such as Isaiah 40:5. The meaning of the word would be related to requiring respect and honour. A sports star may receive glory for an achievement. In John’s Gospel we see this word for glory being used a few chapters earlier in an intriguing and beautiful scene that perhaps can help us imagine how we could understand the word “glory” in John 17. In John 13 Jesus tells Judas to “do quickly what you are going to do”. Judas is seen leaving the room where the disciples are eating, and we are told “it was night”. The very next verse is a fascinating juxtaposition. The imminent abasement of God’s son is followed by this line: “When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him” (John 13:31 NRSV). Somehow Jesus is linking “glory” to humiliation. In one sense on the cross, Jesus is never further from his Father. In another sense he is never closer, never more glorious.

The text also implies that this kind of glorious unity in diversity will be a compelling witness in practical ways to those who see this oneness. I remember participating in a Good Friday walk of Christian unity when I lived on the Shankill Road in Belfast. We would walk between Clonard Monastery on the Catholic/Republican Falls Road to the Protestant/Loyalist Shankill. One of the leaders of this initiative was a saintly Redemptorist priest, Fr Gerry Reynolds. His demeanour was one of unrelenting kindness; gracious, almost mournful eyes; his soft hands always open to welcome any that would walk through his doors; his gentle Limerick accent speaking as if he was pronouncing holy poetry, even if he was just reading a rota for who was using one of the parlours in the Monastery that day. Fr Gerry, more than anyone I’ve ever met, embodied Christlikeness, and a fierce commitment to include.

Perhaps the glory we should seek is that of God and his Son who are inextricably linked by self-emptying, or kenotic, love. This is not the love leading to a unity of the mob or the “crowd”. It was Kierkegaard who said “the crowd is untruth”. Rather this is a unifying glory, a oneness grounded in and achieved by the self-sacrificial agape love, of “laying your life down for a friend”. As we walk this path of unity, we are open to those outside the circle. We walk with saints present and past, like Fr Gerry, and we cross dividing lines assured that we are walking in the way of Christ.

Exclusion and Embrace by Miroslav Volf. 2019 by Abingdon Press.

Unclean: Meditations on purity, hospitality and morality by Richard Beck. 2011 by Cascade Books.

Hospitality and Sanctuary for All by Dr Inderjit Bhogal. 2021 by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

---

## Response

There is an exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount to “pray for those who persecute you”. You may not be under persecution, but consider how you could lift someone to God in prayer who you feel a sense of enmity with.

Take some time as you ponder the words to be silent in a space of prayer.

Bring to God those with whom you have profound disagreements. Don't seek to find agreement with them. But more importantly try to connect to the way God would feel about them.

How can I seek a unity that is not a papering over the cracks, but an exposing of the true roots of a disagreement?

---

## Prayer

Lord, we pray the circle of loving kindness will be wide in our hearts.  
Help us to feel sorrow for the infidelity of our disunity,  
Forgive us for where we have scapegoated.  
Lead us into the space of peace,  
Where we are embraced and where we embrace.  
Let us find you in all we meet and help us walk in your peaceable way,  
The way of self-emptying love.  
Amen

---

## Further Reading