

# As We are One

a sermon preached on the

## 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21; John 17:20-26

The human endeavour is known by its varied external expressions. The need for food, security and safety and peace and order. The need to have a home, to belong. The need to accomplish, to succeed, to build, to conquer, to create, to establish. The desire for love – to love and be loved. The advertising and self-help industries thrive on the marketing of success formulae for achieving such things. And we so-called 'moderns' are easy pickings for the marketing and PR industries which exploit these basic needs, flogging superficial substitutes and quick-fixes of every kind.

Of course, all these things do matter. But all the great the religious traditions have always reminded us that these human endeavours and accomplishments are ultimately transitory. Moreover, that all these things can stand in the way of the one thing that matters most – connection to the ultimate ground in the Divine Being. So when Jesus tells followers that family and business affairs of every kind are impediments to being his disciples, and that they must take up crosses and follow him, he is gesturing to this deep truth.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, of course we do need food, security and safety and peace and order. Yes, we do need to have a home, and to belong. Yes, we do need to accomplish, to build, to conquer, to create, to establish. Yes, we do need to love and be loved. But, good and important though they are, such things are *not* the ground of existence. Jesus, like all the great prophets and teachers, continually gestured towards the direction of true existence – and its priority:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,  
may they also be in us..  
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 love with which you have loved me  
may be in them, and I in them.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, we find St John's language circular and paradoxical. So we can't remind ourselves enough – in this overly-rationalistic and superficial culture - that religious truth can only be expressed in the language paradox. For only the language of paradox is capable of expressing ultimate and inexpressible truth. But even though we may find St John's language dense and paradoxical, even so we can recognise the essence of his thought – one-ness, union. St John's favourite word is 'abiding' – expressing an intimacy of inter-dependence and unity.

But there are other expressions employed by St John and St Paul especially which gesture in the same direction as this abiding: One-ness – as in the essential quality of the un-nameable YHWH as well as the Trinity; **Τελος** *telos*, completeness – that condition of final absolute unity which cannot be known within the confines of any finite, temporal reality; **Πληρωμα** *pleroma*, fulfilment – that fullness of life in which all seemingly incompatible realities are somehow contained; and an insight expressed by St Paul, 'so that God may be all in all' – that state of existence which St Paul anticipates in which God's Being permeates all things, and no thing is outside of God's Being.<sup>3</sup>

It should be sufficiently apparent from all this that the ultimate fulfilment of all human existence is this union, one-ness, completeness, fulfilment - this being in a state of intimate connectedness to the Divine Reality. St John called it 'abiding'. Throughout the Christian centuries spiritual guides have found a rich

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 8:22, Luke 9:60; Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23

<sup>2</sup> John 17:21b,22b,23a,26b

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28 **ἵνα ἡ ο Θεος τα παντα εν πασιν** *hina hē ho Theos ta panta en pasin*, expressed also in Ephesians 1:23 and Colossians 1:20

diversity of expressions to name this same truth - that all human endeavour is, by varying degrees, a pale reflection of the ultimate goal – ‘As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... so that they may be one, as we are one.’

So this is the deepest reality, and the deepest human desire at the root of all desire. Beneath all my furtive striving – to prove myself, to demonstrate what I can accomplish, to belong, to be loved – there lies this Ultimate Concern, in Paul Tillich’s term, which our tradition calls God the Holy Trinity, three yet One. There are many times when no matter how hard I have strived in my endeavours, even so my efforts have missed their mark. There *have* been times when the labour of all my striving may have produced worthwhile fruit. And yet even then there are those times (too numerous!) when those ‘good works’ which I have accomplished did not actually serve others, but only my own need to be seen to be doing good works. And even when good works have served others, even so good works of every kind, the ‘virtues’ as our tradition has named them, remain fragmentary and passing. Good works, as Martin Luther so decisively identified, cannot accomplish that which is our deepest desire. St Augustine’s famous words ring in my ears:

Late have I loved you,  
O Beauty ever ancient, ever new,  
late have I loved you!  
You were within me, but I was outside,  
and it was there that I searched for you.  
In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.  
You were with me, but I was not with you.  
Created things kept me from you;  
yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all.  
You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.  
You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.  
You breathed your fragrance on me;  
I drew in breath and now I pant for you.  
I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.  
You touched me, and I burned for your peace. <sup>4</sup>

For the deepest human desire is to know intimately the one-ness, the in-otering, the completeness, the fulfilment which is the subject of Jesus’ ‘high priestly prayer’. <sup>5</sup> ‘I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’ Jesus prays that the gift of the **Παρακλητος**, the *Paracletos*, the Holy Spirit, may be given to his followers for this express purpose: “You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.” <sup>6</sup>

So now, nearing the end of these great fifty days of Easter, we, too, pray for the gift of this Spirit of union, one-ness. Of course, every time we make Eucharist together this is the essence of our praying:

By the mystery of this water and wine  
may we come to share in the Divinity of Christ,  
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

I am the living bread...  
whoever eats of this bread will live for ever...  
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me,  
and I in them. <sup>7</sup>

This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to re-member me. <sup>8</sup>

We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ.  
We who are many are one Body,  
for we all share in the one bread. <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> St Augustine, *The Confessions*. Book 10, Chapter 27.

<sup>5</sup> John chapter 17

<sup>6</sup> John 14:17b

<sup>7</sup> John 6:51a,c,56

<sup>8</sup> Luke 22:19b

<sup>9</sup> *New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare Aotearoa*, Auckland: Collins Liturgical, 1989, p425.