

Homily for the 7th Sunday of Easter 2022 Year C

Today's Gospel is part of the great farewell discourse of Christ's before He returned to His father, and the central theme of that prayer is for unity among His followers, "That they may be one".

Now if Christ prayed for unity, then He must have seen disunity as a real possibility, as indeed turned out to be the case.

In the early Church, arguments broke out, for example, about such basic things as to whom the Gospel was to be preached. Saint Peter thought only to the Jews, Saint Paul, to the whole Gentile population as well.

Christ's instructions were "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news".

As the Church spread, because of the differences in cultures and philosophies, and the way that men think about various problems, it was not long, about 400 to 500 years, before the church had split completely into two, East and West.

The Church in the East centred on Constantinople, that in the West on Rome.

By the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Church in the West was further divided by doctrinal disputes and differences, and thus, the Protestant Churches were formed. Since then, there has been a steady fragmentation and proliferation of all sorts of sects that would regard themselves as Christian Churches. Each Church fiercely defends their particular truth, insight, doctrine or practice that differentiates it from the other Churches.

No more so than our own Church. By direct descent from the Apostles, we claim to be the one true Church from which all the others have broken away, and I suppose it is true to say that we have developed a sort of siege mentality. This was expressed in the strongest possible terms that outside of the Church there was no salvation, and by the Church we meant us, the Roman Catholic Church.

So, what on earth happened to Christ's fervent prayer for unity? Was it all in vain?

The answer lies partly in our understanding of unity. If by unity we mean uniformity, all believing and accepting the same doctrine and practises, then we are hopelessly disunited, and I doubt if such uniformity would ever be possible again.

But if our understanding of unity can still allow for a certain diversity of expressions in what we believe, a distinctiveness of identity, then Christ's prayer was not in vain. Remember Christ's prayer, "That they may be one, as we are one"? Three persons in one God, distinct, yet in unity. The Second Vatican Council has tried to make enormous strides in that direction. The Church now cautiously addresses these other bodies, as her "Sister Churches". The siege mentality has ceased. She does not challenge their validity as ecclesiastical communities in order to defend her own position. She holds that the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church, but still allows room for recognising the many elements of sanctification and truth that can be found outside of its confines.

So, a unity that allows and recognises differences of identity, excluding errors, seems to be possible. But can we make it no stranger than that? Yes, we can. Look at Christ's prayer again "That they may be one as we are one". True unity should be like the relationship between the Father and Son. The Father and the Son, are one, but the Father remains the Father and the Son remains the Son, so unity can encompass differences of identity.

Then what is it, this element of bond that makes the Father and Son one, that inseparably unites them?

The answer is love.

The love that the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father is the heart of their unity.

Saint Augustine, trying to explain and understand this mystery of the Holy Trinity, sees the Holy Spirit as that love which eternally unites them.

So, do you begin to see how it can fit in? Christ is about to leave His disciples and promises to send them the Holy Spirit when He returns to His father. He sincerely prays that they may be one as He and the Father are one.

He is praying that the bond of love which unites the Father and the Son might permeate and direct the lives of His followers, and that that love ought to be strong enough to somehow overcome or tolerate those divisions, those

doctrinal differences, those accidents of history that men almost inevitably place between each other, by a passionate concern for thought and truth.

For a long time, of course, the scandal was disunity in Christianity was only in terms of doctrinal divisions. That was bad enough, but perhaps the real scandal of disunity in Christianity has been the lack of quality, or the absence of love we should bear towards each other, the love that underlies, guarantees and promotes lasting unity.

When I stand before God, my Judgement will not be a doctrinal exam, as Saint John of the Cross, one of the great Saints of prayer puts it, "I will be judged upon love, and that's where I will have to answer".

But there is ample evidence, despite the fundamental goodwill and goodness of most people, that this quality of love that Christ prays for is not being practised. People feel alienated from each other; families can experience deep divisions; parishes can be split down the middle; differences of liturgy, radicalism and conservatism; Christians of different denominations manufacture hate and even murder each other. There is no simple answer.

My responsibility, and for which I shall be judged, is whether in my own life and my own sphere of responsibility I have tried to promote unity by exercising and expressing love. If, as we say, "God is love", how God like, how much of God, how much love has there been in my life?

True unity is not a passive thing, it must be worked at.

Leave the doctrinal differences to the theologians. They will never solve them.

We at the grassroots have the responsibility to encourage and express that love in our daily lives. Love that forms the foundation and cement that holds real unity together.

And if we haven't started yet, then let us begin in a small way today.

Father, help us to be one, and keep us as one, as you are one. Amen.