

Thursday 28 May 2020: That They May all be One

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Readings: [Acts 22.30; 23.6-11](#); [John 17.20-26](#)

In Australia, this week marks both the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. At the heart of both lies the acknowledgement that our relationships are in need of healing. This is true both for Australia as a society where First Nations continue to face people exclusion and inequality and experience glossing over the wrongs and hurts of the past rather than truth telling and saying sorry, just as it is for our church communities. Our gospel reading from the farewell conversations Jesus had with his friends on the evening before his death speaks straight into this context. Jesus prays to the heavenly Father that his followers may be one, as he and the Father are one. And Jesus prays that the quality of their unity is love, so that by loving one another God's glory may be shown forth, and we, God's people may be brought to the place where Jesus has gone, so that we 'may be with Jesus, where he is, to see his glory'.

Jesus prays to the Father that the quality by which his followers will be recognised is love. He prays that 'the love which which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them'. Jesus prays that God would infuse the hearts of every believer with the love that is at the heart of the Trinity of love. That we would be empowered to love in the same way in which Jesus loves. The way in which Jesus loves is sacrificial, costly. It is self-emptying, the Scriptures tell us. Jesus choosing to lay aside his divinity, his dwelling with the heavenly Father in order to take on vulnerable human nature, in order to share the experience of rejection and lovelessness, in order to experience the harshness and brutality of suffering and death. 'Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped', we read in the epistle to the Philippians. 'Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form', as a humble mortal, he further humbled himself, Paul writes: Jesus 'became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross'. This is sacrificial love, 'not looking to your own interests, but to the interests of others', is how Paul puts it in his reflections on the costliness of love in Philippians.

Living as people who love selflessly is counter cultural, Jesus explains in our gospel reading. The world in which we live does not recognise the value of self-sacrificial love. In fact, the disciples of Jesus need protecting from the harsh selfishness of the world: 'while I was with them, I protected them in the name that you have given me', he addresses the Father in this extended prayer. Now Jesus is leaving the disciples, and he prays his Father's protection on them: 'protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one'. Protect us so that we, by our actions of love and graciousness may make known the very name and nature of God who is the source of all loving, all kindness, all mercy and graciousness. This is what Jesus prays at the end of the prayer set as today's gospel reading:

'I made your name known to my followers so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them'. It is when we place ourselves under the Father's protection, when we are sheltered under the shadow of the most high as the psalmist knows, that we are enabled to act in way that will show forth the Father's love to the world. And when we show forth that love in the world, then we are both granted the gift of unity, and make known the Father's love and name to others. By placing ourselves within the love of God, we are ourselves enabled to love, are united with one another and with God, and bring others to come to know that love.

The key to reconciled living, our gospel reading tells us, is love. That love is a purposeful love: it is given to us believers to empower us to tell the truth into a world that thrives on lies and falseness, because we know Jesus to be the Truth. 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth', Jesus prays. The love that makes for reconciled living is a love that spurs us on: it is given so that we may be sent out into a world that 'hates us because we do not belong to the world, just as Jesus does not belong to the world'. It is given to us believers to model a better way of living in a world that delights in setting up barriers and obfuscating pathways, because we know Jesus to be the Way. 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world', Jesus prays to the Father. And the love that makes for reconciled, unified living is a love that protects. It is given us so that we might protect one another, safeguard the weak and vulnerable, and speak up for those who find living in the world a struggle, because we know Jesus to be the Life. 'Protect them from the evil one', Jesus prays to the Father.

Jesus tells us in our gospel reading that when we place ourselves under the love of God we will 'have his joy complete in ourselves'. Because when we live by the way of God's love, we are made one, are reconciled, are empowered to show the world the true way to life: 'May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ... I in them and you on 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'. Thanks be to God for the gift of his love, which enables us know Jesus to be the Truth, and gives us the courage to tell the truth and begin conversations that may lead to reconciliation. Thanks be to God for the gift of his love, which enables us to know Jesus to be the Way, and gives us strength to be sent into the world to walk alongside those who have lost their ways and begin conversations that may give them new purpose and hope. Thanks be to God for the gift of his love, which enables us to know Jesus to be Life, and gives us strength to share what gives us life with those whose lives are broken or coming to a close and to begin conversations that may affirm them in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. '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'.

Let us pray:

Holy Father, God of Love, You are the Creator of all things:
we acknowledge the pain and shame of our history
and the sufferings of our peoples,

and we ask your forgiveness.

We thank you for the survival of Indigenous cultures
and praise you for 60 millennia of uninterrupted culture in our land.

Our hope is in you because you gave your Son Jesus to reconcile the world to you.
We pray for your strength and grace to forgive,
accept and love one another, as you love us
and forgive and accept us in the sacrifice of your Son.

Give us the courage to accept the realities of our history
so that we may build a better future for our Nation.

Teach us to respect all cultures.

Teach us to care for our land and waters.

Help us to share justly the resources of this land.

Help us to bring about spiritual and social change
to improve the quality of life for all groups in our communities,
especially the disadvantaged.

By your Spirit help all people to find true dignity and self-esteem.

May your power and love be the foundations on which we build our families, our
communities and our Nation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.