

Sunday 24th May 2020 Livestreamed, Grahamstown 9.30 a.m.		7th Sunday of Easter Ascension Sunday - Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Day 59 of COVID19 lockdown
Acts 1:6-14	Ps 68:1-10, 32-35	1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
		John 17:1-11
May they be one		

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17:11).

ASCENSION

Today is Ascension Sunday. Ascension Day was this past Thursday. Jesus is our risen and ascended Lord. We catch a glimpse of the wonder and glory of God. Our hymns for this season – and how I miss singing them right now! - put it so well- here are the first words from the hymn this morning¹:

*The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned
with glory now:
a royal diadem adorns the mighty Victor’s brow.*

*The highest place that heaven affords is his, is his by
right,*

¹ *Ancient & Modern New Standard*

The King of kings, and Lord of lords, and heaven's eternal Light...

The Proper Preface for the Ascension tells that “in his risen body [Christ] appeared to his disciples, told them to wait for the promised Holy Spirit who would clothe them with power, and in their sight was taken into heaven to reign with [the Father] in glory”.² Christ has gone before us into heaven. Like the disciples in our first reading (Acts 1:6-14), our eyes are lifted up to heaven, away from our earthly struggles for a little while. We catch a glimpse of glory. We wait with them for the promised Holy Spirit. So Ascensiontide is the crescendo, the culmination of the Fifty Great Days of Easter.

It is in the context of Ascension Sunday that we hear this prayer of Jesus: “may they be one, as we are one”. Ascension Sunday is also observed as Anglican Communion Sunday, when we give thanks for the Anglican Communion, and we pray for our life and witness as Anglicans. These ten days from Ascension to Pentecost are traditionally observed as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when we pray for the unity of our churches. Here in Grahamstown, some churches are observing the Makhanda Prayer for Unity.

² *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, 136

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER

Our Gospel reading (John 17:1-11) is the first part of what is known as ‘the High Priestly Prayer’ or ‘the prayer of consecration’. In John’s Gospel, it comes at the end of the farewell discourses. Jesus is with his disciples. It is the night of his arrest. It is the Last Supper. Jesus washes the disciples’ feet – including the feet of Judas, who then goes out into the night to betray Jesus. There are the solemn words of Jesus, ‘do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house there are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you...’ Then, in response to a question from Philip, Jesus says, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life...’ There is the promise of the Holy Spirit, the advocate... There are the words ‘I am the vine’... there is the new commandment, ‘that you love one another.’

And, in the other gospels, this night of the Last Supper is also the first celebration of the Eucharist. The life changing actions with the bread and the wine are done. All is now complete. The talking is over. It is a final and solemn rounding off of what has taken place. The stage has been set, the scene prepared, the great events of Good Friday are upon them. All that is left is to do it.

Then comes the culmination. Jesus prays. He consecrates himself – he offers himself to the Father – and he prays for his disciples. He prays in words that we return to again and again, this prayer: that the Father may be glorified; and that

we, his disciples, may be one. It is with this prayer on his lips and in his heart that he goes to Gethsemane and to the cross. Father, may you be glorified. May we be one. It is a prayer that we hear ringing in our ears as we go into the night on Maundy Thursday.

But today we read and hear this prayer in another context. It is not the prayer of one who is about to die. It is the prayer of our Lord in his risen and ascended glory. No longer is he facing the terror and horror of the cross. Instead, it is the prayer of our great high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the Father and who intercedes for us. It is his ongoing prayer for the church, and for us gathered today across Grahamstown and all over the world – may we be one.

This is not a prayer of desperation or despair or fear, but a prayer of trust and faith and love. It expresses his perfect will for us as his followers and disciples.

MAY THEY BE ONE

There are few places in the Gospels where we are allowed a glimpse into the prayers of Jesus. We are often told how ‘he went off and prayed by himself.’ But apart from Gethsemane, and on the cross, we are not given insight into what he prays – except in this prayer.

It is a prayer, and so these are words, this is a prayer, not only to read but to be prayed, and not only to be prayed,

but to be lived. We enter into this prayer and become part of it – as Bishop Tom Wright puts it³, it is like playing *in* an orchestra, not merely watching it. And in praying it, and then by living it, we enter into the heart of God.

To continue with the image of playing in an orchestra: there are three key notes or chords that are played, three themes in this prayer that Jesus prays:

There is the note of celebration. His work is done.

“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do”

“I have made your name known to those on earth whom you gave me from the world”

“... the words that you gave to me I have given to them...”

This note of celebration sums up all that Jesus has done and accomplished: the work done, the words given, the name of the Father made known. That was his calling and commission from God which was now complete. May this be so in our lives also. May our lives glorify the Father.

There is the note of glory:

³ Wright, T., 2004. *John for Everyone*, 92

“Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you...Glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had before the world existed...”

In John’s Gospel, the cross is Christ’s glory. And so is the Ascension. Christ in glory. May we follow Jesus into glory.

There is the note of wonder and mystery:

“May they be one, as we are one...As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us...”

Our unity as the church, as Christians, is based on the unity of the Father and the Son. In our journey to unity, we are brought into the heart of the Trinity.

AND SO...

Jesus our ascended Lord prays for us – that we may be one. It is all too easy to focus on what divides us, both from the past and in the present. We are in our 59th day of the lockdown. It is getting harder, not easier. There is growing tension and disagreement: the closure of Frere Hospital in East London; the court ruling concerning the Makana Municipality; the public disagreement between Professor Glenda Gray and the Minister of Health; worry over the phased reopening of the schools; anxiety about food parcels. Frustration and anger and suspicion on every side.

But there is also a real spirit of unity amongst the churches

and also across town. The Circle of Unity. Food4Futures. Food aid given to the needy. People joining hands to help, to reach out. Looking for solutions. Working together. Neighbours helping one another. This lock down time has brought us together. Let's build on it. May we be one.

And there is also an amazing amount of compassion and care. Infections are on the rise in parts of SA. We won't escape it here. Let's continue to pray for one another and for health care workers; and do all we can to prevent the spread of the virus. May we be one.

There is debate about whether the churches should be allowed to reopen sooner rather than later. We shall hear what President Ramaphosa says to us all tonight, when he addresses the nation. Perhaps the discussion is missing the point. The church has never closed – only the buildings were closed. But our lives of worship, witness and service have continued and in fact have been strengthened. The lockdown has helped us rediscover our core purpose and our calling as the people of God. May we be one.

So the prayer of Jesus is not just a prayer for then, for his disciples 2000 years ago; it is for now. For our time. For our lives. For the church. We are called to build unity, to reach out in reconciliation, to bring healing of divisions. But also to be people of truth. Justice. Honesty. No shallow unity at the cost of all else. No pretend papering over of the cracks. No avoiding of issues to preserve a fragile peace. We pray for a unity that is part of our journey towards the

heart of God, and therefore a journey closer to one another.

We as God's people are to live it, and pray it, and dream it – that we may be one, as the Father and the Son are one. May we enter into the heart of the Trinity in our prayers and in our lives.

CONCLUSION

Holy Father, protect us in your name... so that we may be one, as you and your Son are one. To you we consecrate our lives. Glorify your name.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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