

Seventh Sunday of Easter – 21 May 2023

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

12 My dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful test you are suffering, as though something unusual were happening to you. 13 Rather be glad that you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may be full of joy when his glory is revealed. 14 Happy are you if you are insulted because you are Christ's followers; this means that the glorious Spirit, the Spirit of God, is resting on you. ... 5:6 Humble yourselves, then, under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his own good time. 7 Leave all your worries with him, because he cares for you. 8 Be alert, be on watch! Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. 9 Be firm in your faith and resist him, because you know that other believers in all the world are going through the same kind of sufferings. 10 But after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who calls you to share his eternal glory in union with Christ, will himself perfect you and give you firmness, strength, and a sure foundation. 11 To him be the power forever! Amen.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus finished saying this, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you. 2 For you gave him authority over all people, so that he might give eternal life to all those you gave him. 3 And eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent. 4 I have shown your glory on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do. 5 Father! Give me glory in your presence now, the same glory I had with you before the world was made. 6 "I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me. They have obeyed your word, 7 and now they know that everything you gave me comes from you. 8 I gave them the message that you gave me, and they received it; they know that it is true that I came from you, and they believe that you sent me. 9 "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those you gave me, for they belong to you. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine; and my glory is shown through them. 11 And now I am coming to you; I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one.

Focus: Our oneness with and in God

Function: Help listeners build a close-knitted relationship with God like Jesus's.

Today's Gospel reading is still set in the scene of Jesus's last supper with his disciples. Besides assuring them about gifting them the Holy Spirit, he gave a long speech to affirm the disciples' belief that he came from God and urge them to remain brave and steadfast in faith after he had returned to God. Then Jesus prayed to God the Father extensively, the first part of which we have just heard being read. Throughout the entire supper, we could see how much Jesus loved the disciples and his efforts to reassure them of their relationship with God.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark & Luke), which have Jesus praying hard in the Garden of Gethsemane before his passion, in John's Gospel, Jesus said this long priestly prayer toward the end of his last supper. And interestingly, Jesus wasn't praying silently alone in the corner of the room but aloud and before the disciples. So, after the meal and extended discourse, Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed while the eleven disciples listened on.

It is also interesting to note that in the Gospel of John, there is no record of Jesus teaching the disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer which apparently is only recorded in Matthew and Luke's Gospel. And this record of Jesus praying in the presence of the disciples in John's Gospel may be perceived as John's version of the Lord's Prayer. So what is Jesus's priestly prayer centring on and teaching us, I wonder?

You may have noticed that Jesus initially used the third person to name himself as he prayed, calling himself "Jesus Christ" and using "him" instead of me. He prayed, "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you. ² For you gave him authority over all people, so that he might give eternal life to all those you gave him. ³ And eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent. He prayed as if Jesus Christ was someone else; only from verse 4 onwards that Jesus switched to using "I" and "me".

This unique way of speech in naming himself in the third person impresses me that Jesus was emphasizing God's call on him as the Christ (the Anointed One, the Messiah) and asking God to fulfill God's will in him by giving him the glory as he faced his death and then resurrection, which in turn, would bring God glory because of his characteristic gracious love in laying down of his life for his flock.

With this, Jesus demonstrated to us his desire to glorify God as he set God's will over his own and to accomplish God's desire for humanity by giving them eternal life with the authority God had given him. Indeed, as in the Lord's Prayer, this prayer began with John's version of "May God's will be done on earth as in heaven."

Jesus explained, saying, "Eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent." In other words, eternal life is not merely a gift we receive but born out of knowing Jesus Christ and God. However, the

notion of “knowing” in John’s Gospel is not merely having knowledge or awareness of Christ and God but much much more.

New Testament Greek scholar, Dr William Mounce explains that “it is a knowing that is relational and growing. It is not some fact we accept, but the kind of knowledge that is gained through experience ... John especially has a rich view of what it means to ‘know.’ When Jesus says he knows his sheep and he knows the Father, he is speaking of an intimate relationship that involves deep feelings of love (Jn. 10:14–15). Such a relationship leads to obedience on our part (10:27).”

So, “knowing” in John’s context is having an intimate relationship that involves deep feelings of love – agape love. That’s why we hear Jesus emphasized in his prayer, saying, “I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me. They have obeyed your word,⁷ and now they know that everything you gave me comes from you. ⁸ I gave them the message that you gave me, and they received it; they know that it is true that I came from you, and they believe that you sent me.” From this, we get the picture of the relationship that Jesus had established with the disciples and for them with God.

Three Sundays ago, the bible readings on Jesus as the Shepherd and Gate brought us the focus that when we encounter Jesus, believe in him and enter the Gate we shall have life in all its fullness. Indeed, this life in all its fullness is eternal life because when we have intimate relationships with our eternal God, we shall also live eternally with God. Therefore, this eternal life in Christ is not an eschatological (or future) hope but a present reality.

Therefore, knowing Jesus and God is anchored upon our relationship with Jesus and God, and involves our corresponding participation in Jesus’s ministry by centring our lives on love, justice and service in this community and beyond. Furthermore, it also requires us to pray earnestly as that is the key means for us to communicate with God just as Jesus has demonstrated in this account.

Jesus’s final hope was not a celebration of himself, but praying that people would come to know God through knowing him, and that is, through having a relationship with him. His life and ministry had been demonstrating God’s love and saving purposes for humanity, hence in his prayer, he expressed his desire that his followers would have a close-knitted relationship with God.

In addition to the relationship with God, another distinctive point in Jesus’s prayer is the oneness expressed in “Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one.” It is noteworthy that the same intent was expressed in chapter 10, which says, “²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never die. No one can snatch them away from me. ²⁹ What my

Father has given me is greater than everything, and no one can snatch them away from the Father's care. ³⁰ The Father and I are one."

The "oneness" here is in opposition to a division into parts. That is to say, it is about being united most closely in spirit and will. In other words, it is about unity rather than a singularity or being one and the same. Therefore, Jesus desires and hopes for all his followers (and all of us) to be united in spirit and will and grounded in him, just as he and God are one. This is the climactic point of Jesus's prayer: our oneness with God and in God.

In continuing reading the rest of Jesus's prayer in John 17, we will find Jesus also prayed for future generations of his followers, that is, for us. In verse 20, he said, "²⁰ "I pray not only for the disciples, but also for those who believe in me because of their message. ²¹ I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² I gave them the same glory you gave me, so that they may be one, just as you and I are one: ²³ I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me. Wow, within 4 verses, 4 times it has been mentioned: "May they be one" This speaks for itself about the importance of this matter in Jesus's mind.

Today's first reading from 1 Peter 4-5 is a message of encouragement for fellow Christians suffering persecution and trials. The author urged them to humbly await God's saving help while remaining steadfast in the faith, happy amid the setbacks, and not worrying. It assured them of God's protection, provision and strength. This is a good demonstration of the oneness in spirit and will as we care and pray for one another, the community and beyond.

Having heard all these, what are your thoughts?

How is our relationship with Christ and with one another?

How is our prayer life, especially in praying for others?

Are we overcoming differences within Kew Uniting Church and also beyond to become one in spirit and will in Christ?

I believe that the oneness in Christ requires us to we seek ways to honour the particular gifts, experiences, and insights of each person and each group, and it also requires us to support one another through accountability to the Gospel that we hold in common, and supporting one another with prayers and care. What do you think?

May we entrust ourselves in the Spirit's guidance in living out our oneness with God and in God. Amen.

