

Being one.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Easter; next week is Pentecost. It seems like it's been a long time since Easter, but our gospel reading this morning takes us back to the Last Supper, to the night before Jesus' crucifixion.

When we think about that night, the main things we remember are the bread and the wine – the institution of Holy Communion – Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane and the betrayal by Judas. John's gospel, though, gives us so much more detail about that night.

John chapter 13 tells us that when Jesus and the disciples gathered for the meal, Jesus began by washing his disciples' feet. He then predicted his betrayal, saying that whoever he gave this piece of bread to would betray him, and we learn that 'As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out.' (13:30a), and John adds 'And it was night.' (13:30b) – things were getting dark.

Jesus followed up the prediction about his betrayal with the prediction of his denial by Peter.

These things were dark, were worrying, were unsettling. But the next chapter begins, as I shared a couple of weeks ago, with Jesus saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." (14:1)

And having assured his disciples, Jesus moves to giving them instruction in chapter 15 – summed up in Jesus' command to "Love each other as I have loved you" (15:12). He cautioned them, too "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (15:18).

There was a lot to take in for the disciples – there's a lot for us to take in, too, but for the disciples this was new, and they didn't yet know how the story ended. They knew bad things would soon happen – to Jesus, yes, but also to them.

Jesus saw their concern and gave them this assurance: "Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." (16:20) and chapter 16 ends with Jesus saying "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (16:33)

And then, as we heard in our reading today, Jesus began praying. When we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we read that Jesus prayed frequently – often he would withdraw from the disciples and the crowds and the distractions, and pray. There are a few exceptions (eg Matthew 11:25-26, Luke 23:34, John 11:41-42), but we don't generally have an account of what Jesus prayed. But here we do: After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." (17:1)

This prayer is often called the 'High Priestly Prayer', because Jesus' prayer, which runs for the whole of Chapter 17 - not just the first eleven verses we've had today - reflects the pattern of the prayers of the Jewish high priest on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Jesus was not just praying for himself, but was also praying for the disciples and indeed for all believers.

This prayer is also sometimes called 'The Lord's Prayer in John' because there are parallels from this prayer to what we know today as the Lord's prayer.

Jesus' prayer begins with an apparent request: Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. (17:1). But it's not just a 'glorify me' – he speaks of himself in the third

person – “your Son”. His prayer is a declaration – that the purpose of Jesus’ incarnation – the reason he became human has arrived.

The phrase, “the hour has come,” is important here, too – because it points to the fulfilment of God’s plan. All of history has been leading up to what is about to happen.

Jesus connects the glorification that he prays for to his authority to grant eternal life. “For you granted [the Son] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.” (17:2).

What is eternal life, though? Is it clouds and harps and angels? Well, no, because Jesus tells us what eternal life is in verse 3: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” There is no eternal life apart from God and Jesus – and that reinforces what he had said earlier that evening to the disciples: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:1), “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me;” (14:11a) and “All that belongs to the Father is mine.” (16:15)

Jesus prayed “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” - Jesus had glorified God by his obedience throughout his life, and he would continue to glorify God up to, and in, his death the following day on the cross.

When Jesus prays that he has “revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.” he’s saying that God the Father has entrusted his people to Jesus himself. We know that they weren’t perfect, and yet Jesus declares them to be obedient.

Ministry to, and with, the disciples was an important part Jesus’ mission, and as we will particularly think about next week on Pentecost, when those imperfect and fragile disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they would become powerful and worthy witnesses to Jesus.

The disciples didn’t fully understand all of Jesus’ teachings about his death and resurrection yet, but they certainly had placed their faith in Jesus, even if they had not all accepted him as ‘The messiah, the son of the living God’ as Peter had declared (Matthew 16:16) – We can see that view when we look to the crowds in Jerusalem who identified Jesus as “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matthew 21:11) and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who identified Jesus as “a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.” (Luke 24:19)

The understanding would come, but Jesus had prepared them - “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.” he prayed, “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.” (17:7-8)

And then Jesus prays for them. He says he prays for them and not for the world. But “shouldn’t we pray for the world?” you might ask. Well, yes, we should, but this is a specific prayer and a specific time, and Jesus was clear that he came for the whole world (“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” John 3:17).

But here, Jesus is praying specifically for his disciples, and when he speaks of ‘the world’ here, is not talking about the earth, he’s talk about the ‘world’ which is the things that are opposed – Godly things versus worldly things.

Jesus then uses the other meaning of 'world' the last verse of the reading – “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” (17:11)

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

That was Jesus' prayer for his disciples. It is the only time he used the term 'Holy Father' which emphasises not only God's holiness, but God the Father's relationship to the Jesus, God the Son.

God is holy. God's holiness is central to who God is, and that holiness was emphasised in the Old Testament to the extent that Jewish people did not feel worthy to address God by name. Now Jesus makes known God's name—and that name is Father. That name helps us to see God in a new light, not simply as holy, but also as nurturing – as a parent to us all.

Jesus prays for protection and unity for his followers. For the disciples, and for us today.

This reading from John 17 is from the night that Jesus would leave his disciples, the night before his crucifixion, and our reading from the book of Acts began with Jesus preparing to leave his disciples again – this time at the ascension.

This time, of course, the disciples, who were witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, knew it wasn't a final goodbye – and they stood waiting, and it took two men in white – angels, if you like – to tell them not to stand there looking up at the sky.

So they went, together, back to the city, and they stayed together, the Eleven, plus the women and Mary and Jesus' brothers. They were together – as Jesus had prayed they would be.

We can look at the last two thousand years and ponder how Jesus' prayer – his desire for his followers – “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, [...], so that they may be one as we are one.”

Are we one as followers of Jesus, just as Jesus and God are one? The evidence is not great. We've seen great splits in the church – the split of the oriental and the eastern church, the split of the eastern and the western churches, the reformation with the split of the catholic and protestant churches. That's just the major divisions... then we get the splits by denominations and charisms, and splits by different approaches and theologies and all the rest of it.

It seems Jesus' prayer – which should be our prayer, too - hasn't been answered yet.

Here we are as followers of Jesus, in a world-wide church that has fragmented into many denominations and factions. Over those two thousand years - Christians have spent a lot of time fighting one another – sometimes literally.

And yet, in many way, Jesus' prayer has been answered. Christians from all sorts of backgrounds can be found working together in many places and in many ways. Our denomination, which brought together three different traditions – and has many members who come from many other traditions besides - chose the name “Uniting Church in Australia” rather than “United” because it is a work in progress.

As a congregation, we are taking part in the week of prayer for Christian Unity, and member congregations of the Ku-ring-gai interchurch group are holding four services, dedicated to both

praying, and living out Jesus' prayer that we can be one as his followers just as he and the Father are one.

We have our differences as individuals, as congregations and as denominations, but we come together in our faith in Jesus – that he laid down his life for us all, that he rose from the dead. He conquered sin and death all who turn to him in faith. We are of course all different people, with different backgrounds and traditions, but we are also all created in the image of God. Our challenge is to show that image in our lives – to be the image of God to each other, and also be the image of God to those around us.

As our meditative song this morning said, we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, but it also said they will know we are Christians by our love. Christians like to remember Jesus' New Commandment of John 13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." But I think the next verse is equally important, when Jesus said "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

I think we need to hold on to that in our lives, in our congregation and in our church. Will people know we are Christians by the way we love one another?

Let's continue to pray, as Jesus did, that we may be one and Jesus and the Father are one.

Amen.