

SERMON : JOHN 17:1-11 (EASTER 7, 2020)

MAY the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. <Amen>

“THAT THEY MAY BE ONE”

Isaac Asimov once told a hilarious story about a Rabbi Feldman who was having trouble with his congregation; they couldn't agree on anything. The president of the congregation said, “Rabbi, this can't continue. There has to be a conference, and we have to settle all areas of dispute once and for all.” The rabbi agreed.

At the appointed time the rabbi, the president, and ten elders met around a magnificent mahogany table in the conference room of the synagogue. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness.

The president of the synagogue said, “Come, Rabbi, enough of this. Let's vote and allow the majority to rule.” He passed out slips of paper and each man made his mark. The votes were collected and the president said, “You may examine them, Rabbi. It is eleven to one against you. We have the majority.”

Offended, the rabbi rose to his feet and said, “So, now you think because of the vote that you're right and I'm wrong. Well, that's not so. I stand here,” and he raised his arms impressively while looking heavenward, “and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I'm right and you're wrong.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when there was a deafening clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the mahogany table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and fumes, and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor. Surrounded by rubble the rabbi stood erect and untouched, his eyes and smile flashing with triumph.

Slowly, the president lifted himself out of the rubble. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. Finally he said, “All right, eleven to two. But we still have the majority.”

Unfortunately, we all know that not everything that is done in the Church or in the name of the Church is always done for the glory of God. We know that at times in history, the Church has ignored the Will of God in order to have its own way. As a consequence, there has been discord and disunity in God's Church. This earlier disunity is still apparent in the numbers of denominations that we have today.

At first it was just a family squabble. One group put Scripture above Church structure and called for change but they were rejected, so they protested. So, then the one family became two: the Protestants and the Roman Catholics. But once the squabble started, it snowballed. It wasn't long before the Protestants began disagreeing and became disagreeable toward their brothers and sisters in the faith. And there was disunity in the body of Christ.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus prayed for us, His disciples, because we are still “in the world.” Sadly, being “in the world” we still witness division in the Church. I’m not talking simply about long rooted denominational differences. I’m talking about Christians being divided by moral and social issues that often divide nations.

One church accepts abortion on demand. Another doesn’t. One considers homosexuality to be a God given condition to be celebrated and nurtured. Another considers it a sin of which repentance and grace are the only answer. One considers the definition of marriage to be changeable. Subject to the will of the people. Another considers marriage to be an inviolate institution created by God to be solely between one man and one woman.

Beyond moral issues, the Church is divided by doctrine and practice too. One considers the bread and wine of Holy Communion to be simple bread and wine. Another considers the bread and wine to be the very body and blood of Jesus. One withholds baptism from children because they are considered unaccountable for their sins until a certain age. Another insists that we are all born dead in our trespasses and sins and that baptism is God’s means of rescuing us from the peril of eternal death. One ordains women into the office of the Holy Ministry in keeping with the demands of the culture. Another ordains only men in keeping with the word of God.

The situation is deplorable. <PAUSE>

In Tolkien’s epic The Lord of the Rings, the elf Haldir says, “In nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him.”

Ecumenical efforts, of course, attempt to foster unity among churches, but at best they amount to nothing more than tolerant diversity. At worst, they minimise the importance of God’s Word, which is supposed to be the sole source and norm of everything that is believed and taught in the Church.

Some are left wondering if unity in the church should even be sought anymore, or, if churches are better off just doing their own thing without regard for other churches?

Well, today, Jesus prays for unity in the Church, which means unity among God’s people is a desire that comes from the very heart of God.

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

It is a profound prayer. Jesus asks that unity among God’s people be a reflection of the unity of the godhead. Even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are One God, so the church, He prays, would be one.

It is, therefore, ALWAYS incumbent upon us to seek unity among God’s people.

Divisions in the church are not God’s will, nor are they helpful for the Church’s mission of reaching the unbelieving world with the Gospel of Jesus’ forgiveness and grace!

Jesus challenges His disciples. He doesn't want opinions. He doesn't want disunity.

Jesus wants a confession of our faith based on the Word of God. When Jesus asked, "**who do you say that I am?**" Peter's response, because it was not his opinion, or, the opinion others, but was based on God's Word was "in Jesus' name." Which is to say, it was according to the Word of God.

"You are the Christ (Peter said), the Son of the Living God!" and it was with that confession, Jesus praised Peter, saying, "on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will never prevail against it!"

We ALL, as The Christian Church, hold a faith based on divine revelation, we ALL must find unity in Jesus' name - "the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

<PAUSE>

As simple as that may sound, history has proven that it is anything but simple. In the end, unity in the Church is a divine gift, which comes from the very heart of God, through the fervent prayer of both His Son and ... of you and I ... His disciples.

"Holy Father (Jesus prays), keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one."

<PAUSE>

I offer these words in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who's commandments we live to keep. AMEN.

I runga e te Ingoa o te Atua, te Matua, te Tama me te Wairua Tapu.
In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit <AMEN>