

Well, what a set of readings we have just heard. Difficult enough to read, and even harder to understand. One of those readings that are a real struggle – at least for me! I read it, and read it, and read it, I read the commentaries, and the reflections of others – and then suddenly it dawned on me that it is in essence a love story – an amazing prayer, of love, advice, care and farewell. Can you just imagine it – in a room in the evening heat with 12 of the people dearest to you in the whole world, knowing that you are going to your death and trying to find the words to express how proud you are of those people, and of the work you were brought into the human world to do, in your own human right, with and through others, and in totally loving relationship with the divine you called father and were both part of and separate from.

As Jesus prepared for his crucifixion, he ate with his disciples, he taught them how to commemorate him through the sharing of a meal, and how doing so enables them to remain in, participate in their relationship with him despite his no longer being in the world. As we see in the chapters before this one, he spent a long time talking about what was to come and trying to help them understand what was expected of them. Then he prayed with them. And his prayer was in effect a farewell speech – a valedictory as they say in America. They were listening intently – probably (as we were today) trying to fathom what Jesus was on about – and unlike them he knew what was to come, for him and then for them. Trouble ahead!

It feels a bit like the sort of farewell one might make before going off to war, or away somewhere from which you may never come back and see your loved ones again. Jesus was trying to express his love, his care for them, his pride in them and in what they through and with him were achieving and he was wanting them to feel safe and protected – he prayed to God to protect them, and to help them understand that the more they are at risk, the more they obey their calling, the more they are drawn into an ever deeper relationship with God, through and in their relationship with Christ.

At the heart of his prayer is his love for them, his certainty that the Father too loves them, these people who have recognised and cared for his son. And in praying so he reveals the complexity that is at the heart of the disciples' (and 2,000 years later) our own relationship with God. They were chosen by Christ AND Chose to follow Christ. We are chosen too – created in God's image -in all our wonderful diversity and we choose, freely, to choose Christ, and through Christ to be part of that divine being -in relationship together, separate in our human existence from the divine but knowing that we will in time be fully part of that divine existence too.

And as well as praying for the Disciple's protection Christ reveals something of the purpose of his own ministry. In praying for their protection, he prays for a form of protection such that the disciples become one in relationship with him and the father. All who accept Jesus know they are in the active dynamic presence of the will of God – intuitively if not cognitively. Where Jesus is "there" God's purpose is being fulfilled – played out. And the disciples accepted that instinctively even if day by day they did not really "get it". They accepted Jesus' statement, the fact if you will, that he was sent by the father, and so are able to share in the unity between, the relationship of

Father and Son. And that means they accept their purpose – to do the will of the Father, to be the start of the spread of the kingdom of God.

Jesus prays in a way that we have to really think about. He prays his disciples (and by implication us) are protected from the “evil one” whose intent is to destroy Christian unity, Christian witness to the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and through experiencing hatred, risk and harm also experience joy in the truth, joy in the relationships they have as Christians with each other and with Christ, joy in witnessing to God’s truth and purpose however alien or hostile the place they (and we) find themselves in. Joy in testifying to the re-incarnation no matter how sceptical or hostile the world is, and joy in refusing to allow the world’s cynicism to separate them from each other, or from Christ and hence from God.

It is at the heart of our Christian belief, the proclamation we make as Christians that God the Father is most fully revealed in the Son, and the Son in the Spirit. That unity, that trinity is active, its dynamic, its ever fluid and ever changing – and requires us to understand our interdependence with it and our letting go of our own self to become increasingly in relationship with, and serve God – three in one. Implicit in our understanding is the unity of Father and Son, and everything Jesus does and is in obedience to the Father’s will. But the next step is what Jesus is praying for. Jesus comes to bring the active redeeming presence of God into our human lives and human world. We are called to bear witness to that. And we can only do that if we are at one with Christ.

That means trouble ahead – for the disciples and for each of us. As Jesus ascended to the Father the embryonic Christian community of the time, and the world wide church of our own time are given the weighty, risky and particular responsibility of witnessing to and testifying about what we understand of the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to live our lives in this world accordingly – drawn ever closer to that unity. A task full of weighty responsibility but also full of joy. In God’s love, in Gods’ care, God’s will for us we bear good news in a dis-united, despairing and hurting world – despite the cost of doing so.

Revd Jane Held