Jesus’ Great High Priestly Prayer

Rev’d Peter Balabanski

Easter 7 A – Ac 1.6-14, Ps 68.1–10, 32–35, Ist Pt 5, Jn 17.1–11

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Holy Father, protect them in your Name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. Jn 17.11b. John 17 begins each year’s international Week of Prayer for Christian unity – in the lead-up to the first Christian Pentecost.

Today’s gospel reading is the beginning of a passage that the Church calls Jesus’ *Great High Priestly Prayer*. Here we see Jesus as priest, praying for those in his care that we may be one. What do we make of Jesus as our Great High Priest – which means someone who intercedes with God on our behalf? How do we take hold of that? I’m used to encountering this idea of prayer in churches where saints and angels are also asked to pray for us.

I’ve had conversations over many years with people who view that sort of prayer with deep suspicion. They see it more as a sort of superstitious lobbying than prayer. They feel that ‘real prayer’ should be between *just me and God – direct, with no intermediaries*. They feel that teaching people to pray by asking Mary or Jude or Christopher or anyone else to pray for us is some sort of heresy. But then I also hear of God answering just such indirect prayers in quite spectacular ways.

And then there are plenty of faithful Christians who look at us Prayer-Book Anglicans with at least one eyebrow raised: *Can’t you pray unless it’s written down in front of you?* they

ask. *What sort of prayer is that? Where's the spontaneity? How do you expect the Spirit to find room to move if your prayers have all been written down years in advance?* Providentially, the Holy Spirit is astonishingly versatile – not constrained at all by time; God is very broad minded; and Jesus is welcoming of the most unlikely.

You might think it's pretty odd for me to be talking about all these differences between Christians on this first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. No lobbyist worth their salt should do that. But I think it's really important to enter this week in the clear knowledge that we ***are*** all different, and yet, we are all alike loved by God. It's really important that we don't confuse a week of prayer for Christian ***unity*** with hopes of a week of prayer for Christian ***uniformity***. The two things are not the same. If we try to define unity as uniformity, we are violating something that is fundamental to our created being, and to all our different ways of belonging to Jesus.

Story: The week of prayer for Christian unity in Jerusalem.

Something that's absolutely basic to the faith of all varieties of Christians is that Jesus did what he did for us before we had taken a single step towards him. So no-one was out in front; no-one stood out as being 'right'.

St Paul puts it this way in Romans 5.[6-8]

… while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. [8] But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

What Paul is saying is that our relationship with God doesn't depend on whether or not we've got our theology straight. Paul – once a persecutor of the Church himself – learned that our

relationship with God depends purely and simply on one thing; the gracious love of Jesus. And that goes for everyone, even persecutors of Christians.

None of us can say another Christian's way of responding to God's is unacceptable to God. It's up to God to decide. And frankly, what God is gracious enough to accept is always likely to astonish us. That is, quite literally, our saving grace.

Jesus prayed that we may be one. That prayer is the reason for the week of prayer for Christian Unity. The first **unity** we need to recall is that despite our squabbles and failings, we all stand equal before God – all alike, loved by God. And the proof of this is Jesus's coming for our sake before any of us knew him. So much for our partisan, tribal disunity. That's a different world. Our unity is in the welcoming, all-embracing call of Jesus.

But then what? This is where the link with ***prayer*** comes in this Week of **Prayer** for Christian Unity.

Prayer opens us to the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit. She will receive our multitudes of apparently conflicting various yearnings, and somehow weave that chaotic variety and contradictions into a blessing that is whole and unified – a blessing which can empower us to be Christ's blessed presence in this world. This comes through the grace of unity – then effect of Jesus' prayer – and our response.

Yes; we have agency in this. Sr Joan Chittister put it this way. She said that *…prayer is not something given to us to change the world. It is meant to change us, so that we can change the world.* Prayer is something ***given to us*** so that **we can change the world**.

I pray that we may join our Lord Jesus in his prayer that we may be one. May we overlook and even celebrate our variety – because that doesn't seem to bother Him at all – and so let

the world know that no-one can be separated from the love of God, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen