

John 17: 20-end; Acts 16: 16-34

Today we come to the final Sunday of the Easter season. I don't know about you, but the events of Easter Sunday seem to be quite distant now, happening as they did nearly two months ago.

The readings from the Book of Acts that we hear through the season have now taken us far beyond the events of Easter and the Ascension and now tell the story of the life and adventures of St. Paul and the early Church. But the Gospel reading holds us back a little. The Gospel reading set for today is our witnessing to the prayer that Jesus prayed on the night of the Last Supper. So we have these two time-lines running alongside each other in our readings today: one from events long after Easter and one from Jesus' last evening before the events of Easter Sunday have even taken place.

So why do we have this dual perspective in the Lectionary? Well part of the reason is to help us recall the important events of Jesus' Passion throughout the Easter season. The other reason is to do with identity.

Let me explain what I mean when I talk about identity.

I want you to try and imagine what it was like for the Apostles and the other disciples in Jerusalem just after Jesus' ascension into heaven. If you were able to ask any of them what religion they were, they would have replied that they are Jewish. As they preach in Jerusalem, other Jews heard them and came to believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. But soon their preaching began to spread to other cities outside Judea. The people who came to believe in these cities were Greek or Roman or Arab. If they were slaves they might come from far-flung regions of the Roman Empire, perhaps even from the mysterious, as yet unconquered land of Britannia. And if you asked them their religion, they would probably reply that they believed in a variety of gods, adherents of one of the many pagan religions of the ancient world.

None of them would have replied 'Christian' because that term had not yet been invented. The earliest Christians sometimes described themselves simply as followers of 'The Way'. But what we had was highly diverse group of people, from many different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Perhaps the only thing they really had in common was the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died and rose again, and that through belief in Him the way has been opened to eternal life.

When we think of it this way, Jesus' prayer on the night before He died begins to make a lot more sense. Seeing as Jesus knows He is about to die, we might think that His final words would be instructions to His disciples on what to do in His absence, perhaps some pragmatic advice on how to maintain unity within their community.

But instead we witness something very different. Jesus does not leave instructions to His disciples; He prays for them. In those final hours He entrusts not only their future, but the future of the Church throughout all generations to the care of God the Father.

In His prayer Jesus petitions God to allow all His followers, those in the present and those in the future, that they may be one, just as He and the Father are one. He asks God to allow the Church to share in the love that exists between God the Father and God the Son, through the gift of God the Holy Spirit.

If we think about the Church today, spread across the world, so many different denominations and ways of doing things, so many different cultures and languages, and yet we have one thing in common, the same as those first followers of Jesus in the ancient world: we are the people for whom Jesus prays. That is our common identity.

So on this final Sunday of Easter, the Gospel reading invites us to remember this common identity as we approach the Feast of Pentecost. On the face of things, the Church on earth is more divided now than it has ever been, with all sorts of arguments about a range of theological and practical points. It could be easy to allow ourselves to slip into despair; to assume that everything is irretrievably broken.

But then we remember that our identity as Christians is not for us to make or break: it is already complete within the love of God. We are the people for whom Jesus prays. If we can learn to accept this as gift, then we are ready for any of the challenges that may come in the future.

Amen.