

Sermon 29 May 2022

John 17:20-26

This passage brings Jesus's final discourse to his disciples to an end. I want to focus on two points. Firstly, Jesus talks about unity. *'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me, that they may all be one.'* 'These' refers to the disciples, 'those' refers to us. He then goes on to say, *'The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.'*

Unity, or rather a lack of unity, is an issue for our Christian church. All too often there is division around race, belief and even politics. A few days ago I came upon this article: 'This past Sunday, Global Vision Church pastor Greg Locke made headlines after he told his congregation, "You cannot be a Christian and vote Democrat in this nation. A bunch of creeps stole an election that everybody knows they stole.' He went on to say he believes government officials are purposefully starving babies due to the challenge to abortion rights. 'If you vote Democrat I don't want you around this church. You can get, you demon, you baby-butcher election thief!' His exact words.

Wow! Nothing like a good dose of Christian love. Now I am sure pastor Locke represents a minority, though it has to be pointed out that he does have a very large following. However, I would like to think that here in New Zealand we tend to be a tad more moderate, but one of the biggest problems we have as a Christian religion is that as Christians we don't always promote our brand very well. We are often seen by the person in the street as being judgmental, exclusive and rather hypocritical. We need to address that.

If our church is to grow, and by 'our church' I mean both our immediate church and the wider church, then we have to reach out across boundaries of race, culture and belief. In the words of Jesus, we need to become 'completely one.' Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour.' He did not qualify that command. He did not say, 'Love your neighbour as long as he/she looks like you, thinks like you, behaves like you.' No way! But for many people looking in from the outside, this is the impression they have. We need to change that impression. I feel so strongly about this which is why you have heard me talk about this before and you will hear me talk about it again and again. I don't apologise for repeating myself.

A few days ago I attended a workshop in Howick run by the Wilberforce Foundation. It involved church leaders of different denominations across East Auckland meeting to explore ways of promoting the gospel to our community. A range of culture, gender and belief were represented. I thought 'This is great; this is what our church should be all about; this is what Jesus meant when he said he wants us to be one.'

This is precisely why we are proposing to build a community centre along with our new church. If we are not prepared to involve our local community, I don't believe we are fulfilling Jesus' wishes, his commands as expressed in this Gospel passage.

The second point I want to highlight is that this passage concludes Jesus' charge to his disciples to continue his ministry. At the end of last week's sermon, I made the point that when Jesus addresses his disciples, he is addressing us all. As I have already pointed out, he emphasises this at the beginning of this passage. As believers in him, we are by default his disciples, so we are also charged to carry out his ministry, albeit in our own small way.

There is the story of the great Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini who wrote a number of famous operas, including 'Madame Butterfly' and 'La Boheme.' In 1922 the 64-year-old Puccini was stricken with cancer. In spite of this disease, Puccini was determined to finish his final opera, 'Turandot', which many now consider to be his best.

He worked on it day and night. When his sickness worsened, Puccini said to his disciples, 'If I don't finish, I want you to finish this opera for me.' Then came the fateful day in 1924. He died. His disciples gathered together the various scores from 'Turandot', studied them and then completed the opera.

In 1926 the opera premiered and was conducted by Puccini's favourite student, Arturo Toscanini. Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini was forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, 'Thus far the Master wrote, but he died.'

There was silence throughout the opera house. No one moved. Then Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and said, 'But his disciples finished his work.' When 'Turandot' ended, the audience rose to their feet and broke into thunderous applause. No one there ever forgot that moment.

Jesus passed his baton on to his disciples. As his disciples, we inherit that charge. His work has to be carried out, from generation to generation. Creating God's kingdom is rather like creating a symphony. Everything needs to work in harmony. If the different movements, parts of an opera are disjointed, then the opera won't work, it will not have any impact. In the same way, if the church is to have an impact, we must be one; we must be unified. And most importantly, we must all play our part.