

7th Sunday Eastertide Homily

“May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.”

So this is Jesus prayer for us just before he dies.

He is talking about being ‘one,’ about unity, and what he clearly sees as our greatest need is to refind, rediscover, the communion, the integrity, in the original sense of the word, that we have lost.

What breaks, ruptures, does he see as needing healing? One level, the break between ourselves and God, and on the other, the divisions among ourselves. If we think about it, the Bible has been underlining these problems from the start, with the images and message of Adam and Eve’s challenge to God and the resulting state of ‘original sin,’ as we call it. Then the Tower of Babel and the falling out among peoples and the division into many distinct languages. Communication, the glue of community, has broken down.

Both these problems, the break between God and ourselves and between ourselves, are linked, and the answer to both is in the presence of God among us as one of us in the person of Jesus.

We have just heard in past weeks that the first thing Jesus said to the disciples after the resurrection was ‘peace.’ Another way of expressing an end to division and conflict. But still the divisions in our world are very real. We look at Ukraine, but we can look at our own society, with an increasing gap between rich and poor, those with work and those without, those who can afford the medical care they need urgently, those who have to wait. All of these lead to a feeling of grievance and conflict in the end.

Because of Jesus’ message, the faith groups are often able to see the need to heal, to see a different answer, then simply to say, ‘the answers our world comes up with are often not the ones we need.’ Such as ‘market forces will sort it all out,’ or ‘we cannot help everyone.’ Because for Jesus each one of us is precious, no one is expendable.

I spent Thursday morning with Churches Together in Lancashire hearing about all sorts of things that church communities are doing to bring people together, to value them. But also listening the NHS staff who have suddenly realised (or the Government department has) that dividing the NHS up into competitive units is not going to work, and now South Cumbria and Lancashire are to be united in an Integrated Care Plan. Whether you think yet another reorganisation of the NHS will work or not

is another matter, but the significance is that it is bringing all the aspects of health together and not dividing them.

They in turn are asking all the voluntary organisations, those trying to help people find a way of life that has dignity, a decent standard of living, to be a part of it, as are the Councils in what they call Social Prescribing. This idea is that Councils have a department just to help people with whatever their problems, and what is more have time for them. To steer people to whatever help they may need which can often be for example, resources in social groups and parishes where people are seeking to help those those with dementia or lack of food or loneliness whatever it may be. To use local resources and work together. Now we can all be a bit jaundiced about yet another reform, but it is about bringing people and the structures together which is a positive.

So the call from Jesus for us to be one, as he and the Father are, can be about very practical measures, bearing in mind that Jesus was always about healing people and giving them back their dignity.

Remember the man chained in the tombs by his fellow townspeople because he was possessed or mentally ill perhaps. Jesus cures him and rather than have him join him and walk with a small band of disciples, he says, 'Go back and be with your people in the town. Take up your right place in society again.' No one in our society should be outside this hope for them too.

Now what we may sometimes fail to grasp is that our vision for society, for community, comes from the fact that we are now, in Jesus, directly linked to the Trinity. To that perfect relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St. Augustine says of the Ascension, as I mentioned on Thursday night, that the head of the body of Christ now sits in heaven, but we, as the body, are still here and that unity of head and body is exactly what Jesus has established. What happens to the body is felt by the head.

We are bound to what is divine, to who is divine. When Stephen looks up into heaven and sees Christ there, this may be just as it happened, but what the account is telling us is that we are so close to heaven that in a sense we can look up into it and we can see, know the Risen Christ. Know God in a completely fresh way now that Jesus has revealed it to us, and that has to, must, impact on our daily lives, both in our spirituality and in how we try to live with our brothers and sisters.

In a while we will pray the Our Father and say: 'Thy Kingdom come. May thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' We pray it and we need to help it happen.