

Reflection for 17th May (Easter 7)

In today's passage from St John's Gospel, we are overhearing part of the great prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper, in which we are given an insight into the mystery of the relationship between him and his Father. The unity of Jesus with his Father is emphasised time and time again in this prayer, as is Jesus' wish that his followers should enter into the same kind of unity among themselves – a wish that the Church throughout its history has conspicuously, and sadly, failed to fulfil. Nevertheless, the love of the Father and the Son embraces all who are Christ's disciples, and Jesus prays that his followers will know the protecting love of God.

This must have been heart-warming for those who first heard this Gospel read in the early Church, because by then they had faced the rigours of persecution. They knew what it was like to live in a hostile society – something most of us have never experienced – and they already had their first martyrs. The knowledge that Jesus, just before his death, had prayed for the protection and unity of his followers would have been reassuring and empowering for them.

For many of us as Christians, this element of the Christian faith is what our discipleship is all about: our lives are undergirded by the conviction that God loves us, and that is what sustains us. But that is not the end of the story. Yes, it is true that we are all held firm in the love of God, but there is another equally important element of discipleship, and it is the one we refer to as mission. This is the other element in today's readings, and it's the one towards which the passage from Acts points us. It is that God's love is given to us so that we can share it with others.

The story of the Ascension, right at the beginning of Acts, marks the transition from the ministry of Jesus to the response of the apostles as they took up their commission to be Christ's witnesses. In a similar way, being a Christian, being part of the Church, is about holding together in one relationship both the wonder of being loved by God (and sustained and nourished by that love), and also the empowerment by God to share in his loving mission to the world.

So the prayer of Jesus includes a plea that his disciples might share a unity as close as the unity between Jesus and his Father, and makes it clear that the purpose of that unity is so that the world might believe.

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