

God, Community and Ministry

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Preacher: Stephen Hale

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of June 2003. The preacher is Bishop Stephen Hale.

His sermon is entitled God, Community and Ministry and is based on John chapter 17 verses 1 to 26.

Precious God, we thank you for the privilege of bringing your word together and considering its implication in our lives. And we pray for assistance as we do that for your Holy Spirit together. And we pray that in Christ's name. Amen. Please be seated. It's great to be here this morning and a privilege to be a part of the 149th anniversary celebrations here for Holy Trinity, which I'm sure are just a small preparation for the big one next year when you celebrate 150 years.

And I guess it's always a privilege to be a part of a church both at a time of confirmation, which we're doing this morning in baptism and reception, but as well as at an anniversary like this. I wonder whether you've got anyone in your life who you might consider as a person who intercedes on your behalf, someone who maybe is a great prayer.

[1 : 15] Because I'm very fortunate that as part of my time when I was at Diamond Creek, I inherited a lady called Joan who's a great prayer warrior. And she's someone who insists on praying for me every day and gets very agitated that she doesn't have appropriate information, which I somewhat sometimes occasionally don't get to her in time.

So at present she's up working in a remote Aboriginal community somewhere in outback Northern Territory. But she rang the other day to tell me off in no uncertain terms. And if you've met Joan, she's a very forthright lady because she hadn't received my diary and therefore my prayer points and other things that go with that.

So I, you know, had to repent and get on to my secretary and ask her to send her stuff through straight away. Otherwise the wrath of Joan is something you don't want to experience. Well, not a second time anyway.

But it's a great blessing to have someone who you know prays for you. And she's one of these people that gets up at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning every day and prays for several hours. And as I say, at least half of the kingdom of God is totally dependent on her.

And we hope that in a sense God keeps her going for as long as possible because she's fantastic. Well, one of the things that we're thinking about today is that it's Trinity Sunday. And as you know, Trinity comes after Pentecost, which also comes after the Ascension.

[2 : 26] And Christ our Lord has gone back to be with His Father in glory. And one of the things that we're told that He's actually doing in this time while He's with His Father before He comes again is to intercede for us.

He's therefore sitting at the right-hand side of the Father, begging and pleading and praying on our behalf before the Father. And today we want to reflect a little bit on what Jesus is actually praying for us.

And we're going to do that by looking at John chapter 17, which is Jesus' most extensive prayer that's recorded in this chapter. Now, in a sense, this chapter could do with at least six sermons, probably ten if it was Paul.

Or have you already done a series like this? No. But I'm sure you will at some stage, now that I've suggested it. But I'm actually doing the whole chapter in one sermon, and it's a great passage, and it gives us fantastic insight into how Jesus is praying for us as His people.

Well, in the first part, in John chapter 17, Jesus prays for Himself in verses 1 to 5. And in essence, He's coming to the climax of His earthly ministry.

[3 : 34] And as He reaches this climax of His earthly ministry, as He contemplates His death and His resurrection, Jesus prays that God would glorify Him and therefore vindicate Him. And that, in a sense, the glory that He'd enjoyed as part of the Godhead and part of the Holy Trinity throughout eternity is something that He'd be able to return to, vindicate it, and as the person who'd actually suffered death, but resurrected from that dead, and then ascended into glory and returns to be back with God where He'd been throughout all eternity.

So in this first part, He prays in a sense that God would honour Him as He enters into what He's about to do, and that God would therefore glorify Him so that He would be truly seen to be who He is, which is God, as a member of the Trinity.

He then moves on in verses 6 onwards to pray for firstly His disciples, and then for us who are affected by the ministry of those disciples, even if it's 2,000 years down the track.

And Jesus prays here that the Father has revealed, so that Jesus has revealed His Father to those God gave Him. They were called out of the world, and they responded by obeying God's Word.

And one of the things about the Holy Trinity is that the Trinity is a sign of the fact that God is a God, a God of relationship within Himself. He's a God who communicates within Himself.

[4 : 50] He's not just sort of a static entity or a theological concept, but God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were a dynamic unity, and who enjoyed perfect relationship, unbroken relationship throughout eternity.

And part of that relationship was communication, and communication that takes place by the communication of words. And in the same way, God as a God of relationship within Himself is a God who wants to enter into relationship with us.

And part of the nature of the Trinity, which is a great blessing for us, is that God is a God who wants to be in relationship. And relationships are expressed through the communication of words. And so Jesus taught His disciples God's Word, and everything that the Father had given Him, He gave to His disciples.

And what we believe today is what has been passed down to us, because it's the very Word of God that had come from the Father to the Son by the Holy Spirit to us today. So we stand as great inheritance of that work that Jesus began with those first disciples.

And what did He teach them? Well, in verse 3, we get an incredibly simple summary, because He says, Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

[6 : 03] Now, in a sense, we've already had the answer to that question from the children this morning. I don't know whether you heard the answer. How do we get eternal life? Well, we have to die. I thought that was a great response. It was the obvious response to the question, wasn't it?

But the response was that it's through Jesus Christ that we get eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

So eternal life comes when we know Jesus Christ, and through Him, God the Father. And how can we know Jesus Christ? When someone teaches us about Him. And the fact that we're here this morning, living as witnesses of Christ, worshipping in this way, celebrating 149 years of faithful witness and ministry, and the teaching of God's Word in this place, is because the Word of God has been faithfully proclaimed and taught.

It's been carried along. It's continuing to be given to children and young people. And it's being offered to you in this wider community again and again today. And because of that, we can come to a knowledge of God, and therefore have a confidence of eternity with Christ, because that's where Christ is today, and we go therefore to be with Him.

Now Jesus moves in this prayer to the heart of the prayer, which is from verse 9 onwards, which is He says, I pray for them. Firstly, He says, I pray for His own, but not for the world.

[7 : 20] And in this particular prayer, Jesus is concerned for those who God has given Him. He's not in a sense concerned, at this point, for the God-despising world, but more particularly for those who God has called to Himself.

Now I guess from a worldly point of view, they were an incredibly ordinary bunch, just some fishermen and tax collectors, 12 average, ordinary, seemingly insignificant men.

But to Jesus, they are a unique group who belong to God, and have been given to Him to teach and disciple. And so therefore, everything that belonged to God the Father, Jesus taught to that particular group of disciples, and the ones that He'd been given.

He made an incredible investment in that particular group of men. And amazingly, Jesus says, He's going to be glorified in His disciples, because as they, in a sense, receive what He had received from the Father, and as they actually seek to work out what that means, and to live it out, and to pass that on to other people, great glory is given to Jesus.

So as people follow Jesus, the truth of God's Word is demonstrated. And we'll, in a sense, see a little demonstration of that this morning, when a number of people will stand and declare that they've turned to Christ, as part of their baptism and confirmation, and their reception.

[8 : 36] And that's an encouragement to us, isn't it? And the amazing thing, is not only is it encouraging to us, but Jesus is glorified Himself, as they make that particular commitment. Well, secondly, Jesus prays that these disciples would be protected by the power of His name, in verses 10, 11, and 12.

Jesus recognizes that He has to go back to His Father, and that He'll no longer remain in the world. And so, therefore, He prays that these particular disciples, as they continue on in the world, would be protected by the power of His name.

He prays that as they continue in the world, that God would actually uphold them. And so, while Jesus was physically with them, He was able to protect them, and to, in a sense, assist them and support them, encourage them and nurture them.

But He, of course, has to leave. So, as we have had the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Jesus' prayer was powerfully answered. Jesus called a small band of disciples. He taught them, and they believed.

They became fully convinced that Jesus was God's Son, and went on to continue God's work after Jesus left them. Jesus wasn't with them physically any longer, but the comforter, the Holy Spirit, was.

[9 : 41] And with God's strength and God's protection, the work of God and the Word of God has gone forward and continues today. And therefore, the outcomes, in a sense, are far beyond any human explanation, or any, in a sense, defy what you could consider to have been even achievable or considerable.

Because 12 people were able to go on and do something absolutely incredible, leading to the Church existing in every part of the world, and continuing with great vigor, even till this day.

And the very fact that we're here today is a testimony to the knowledge about Jesus Christ that is still alive, that started with that first witness of those first disciples. Well, Jesus prays that they'd know the joy that comes from knowing Him, and He prays that they might actually continue with His Word, the Word that God spoke to Him.

They might be grounded in that Word and live in it. And then He particularly prays that, in a sense, they would be protected as they continue to live in the world. He says, My prayer is not that you take them from the world, but that they actually continue in this world, and live in a place that's hostile, and a place where there's actually intense opposition to the Word of God.

So Jesus' prayer isn't what we might necessarily prefer. He doesn't ask God to pull us out of the world, but rather that we would be left in the world, and we'd be protected as we seek to live for Him.

[11 : 02] Well, I guess, though, there's always been different approaches taken by Christians to this particular issue. Some Christians have taken the view that we need to withdraw from the world completely in order to remain faithful to Christ and to not be tainted by the world in which we live.

When I was a curate in Sydney at a place called Castle Hill, there was a community that lived in Castle Hill that had withdrawn themselves completely. They'd left the local churches because those churches were considered to be somewhat aberrant in the way they were following Christ, and they'd bought a whole series of houses in a particular part of the suburb.

The ladies wore veils, and they had nothing to do with anyone in the community. They set up their own school, and it was a completely closed group. I don't think that's necessarily how Christ wants us to live, but that was their response to this particular way of working out the tension of living in the world.

Other Christian people become so immersed in the world that they become almost indistinguishable from it because they accommodate at every point to what the world is on about and the world is suggesting.

And I guess you could perhaps say that some of the extreme things that are happening in the Episcopal Church in North America at present, both in Canada as well as in America, are in a sense

expressions of an accommodation to the world which leads to radical outcomes which cause huge tension in the church.

[12 : 22] Well, other Christians may not be, in a sense, withdraw completely from the world, but what ends up happening to them is they end up getting caught up in a Christian subculture because all of their friends are Christians. The people that they mix with and have a lot to do with are all converted and committed people.

And in a sense, even though they're living in the world, they perhaps have become disconnected from the world. Well, in other ways, at other times in the world, in the history of the church, the world's, the church rather has sought to take on the world and has sought to impose Christian values upon the world itself.

This happened with the Holy Roman Empire, it happened with the Crusades, it happened with Cromwell and the English Revolution, and it happened in Christian Europe at the height, in a sense, of the church's influence.

Well, they're all particular ways of responding. Well, God actually has called us to be Christians who live in the world, but to not be of the world. And that's the great conundrum and great tension that we all have to work out, isn't it?

How do we live for Christ in the world? A world of place, a place which is hostile, a place which is opposed to the Christian message, and a place where there are all sorts of temptations and pressures, but not in a sense to blend into it and to become completely immersed in it so that we lose our way and lose our commitment to Christ.

[13 : 38] I want to commend to you a small resource that I came across recently from George Cervantes, who's a faithful Christian acting in the world, and it's called Supporting Christians at Work, and it's a guide for Christians in the workplace.

I'll give it to Paul later, and no doubt on his next trip to England he can pick up copies of it because it's freely available in England, I'm told. And I think it's a really great resource for thinking about the implications of what it means to be a Christian and to actually faithfully witness to Christ in the workplace.

Really simple, very accessible, and very well set out. Well, Jesus has called us to live in the world but to not be of it. It's a hostile and dangerous place, and it's in great encouragement to know that Jesus today is praying for us.

And when you leave this place, and tomorrow most of you end up in the workplace, Jesus is praying for you in that workplace, that you continue to live faithfully for him there, that you'd witness to him, and that you'll actually seek to be in the world but not of it.

Well, that's why Jesus goes on to pray that we would be sanctified by truth because your word, he says, is truth. Disciples are the ones who are set apart to be holy, and we grow in holiness as we grow in our knowledge of the truth of God's word.

[14 : 52] Now, sometimes evangelicals are accused of being too word-focused, and we're sometimes written off as being fundamentalist or biblicist. Which means we've, in a sense, put the Bible above God and placed that in too high a place.

Last year I was preaching in a church which, of course, shall remain nameless, and at this particular church I was just simply seeking to take what Jesus had said and to work out what that was. I assumed that what Jesus said was what he actually did say.

It seemed to me to be a pretty straightforward approach to take. And after the service, this lady very aggressively accused me of being a fundamentalist because I was taking the Bible too seriously. I did somewhat suspect that she was a fundamentalist in her attitude to me.

But, of course, being a bishop I was very gracious and didn't say that. I just thought that. But this church here could be accused of being too word-focused, too biblical, too committed to the scriptures, perhaps.

Well, I guess what I want to say this morning is that what Jesus is saying here is that if you don't have the word of God, then you have no basis for life with Christ, do you? Because it's only through the word of God that we can actually hear God speak to us and the very words of God can be communicated to us so we can enter into a relationship with him.

[16 : 06] If you don't have the word of God, then you don't actually have any knowledge of Christ because how on earth do we know about Jesus today except through the word of God? That's how we know about Christ. And that's the faithful witness and deposits that's been passed on to us that we have to faithfully be committed to today as well as pass on to others.

Without the word of God, there can be no hope because you can't actually live for Christ in this world as well as have a confidence of the world to come without the word of God.

And without the word of God, there's absolutely no basis for becoming more and more holy and becoming the person God wants us to be. We're just a sitting target waiting for the world to in a sense force us into accommodating because we're not being strengthened by a knowledge of God's word and how he wants us to live so that we can live faithfully for him with that knowledge as our backdrop.

One of the things that I think that's interesting that's happening in the wider church and perhaps in the Anglican church at present is what I'm calling a drift back to orthodoxy. A lot of churches that have gone down what's called the liberal path and in a sense have hung loose to what the Bible teaches in the last 30 or 40 years as they're now facing their own crisis of the failure of that sort of ministry and the future of those churches being fairly grim are in a sense coming back somewhat perhaps tentatively to working out what it means to be an orthodox Christian person.

I've been reading a book called *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* recently by Thomas Oden and he points to a test which was put forward by Vincent of Lerence in the 5th century which he called the threefold test that which has been believed everywhere always and by all that which has been believed everywhere always and by all.

[17:49] So in other words what that test is saying I suppose is there are certain things that Christians have always believed and they've held to those things everywhere and they've been held by all Christian people. In a sense they're encapsulated for us in our creeds aren't they because those creeds were put together at the end of a period of long discussion and long turmoil when Christians in a sense agreed on what people have believed everywhere and those things have stood the test of time and they've formed the basis of what we consider to be orthodox Christian belief today and I think it's encouraging to think that people are wanting to move back to this as they seek to in a sense discover a future for their own particular church and hopefully we can encourage them in that journey.

Well if you want to survive in the world and not be swamped by it then you need to know the truth because as Jesus said it's the truth that sets you free and you ought to be very thankful to God that part of the rich deposit and inheritance and heritage that you have here at Holy Trinity is a church that honours the word of God where the word of God is faithfully and vigorously taught and very ably taught and where in a sense that's an absolute hallmark of the life of this church and you'd have to say that one of the reasons why this church is healthy and growing is because the word of God is so vigorously proclaimed and clearly honoured in people's lives and you ought to pray that God would sustain those who do that primarily as teachers of God's word with your two Pauls and Carol and others but as well as that that you would be able to do that yourselves in small groups and in other ways well Jesus says here that we actually need to honour the word of God and be sanctified by the word of God if we're going to live faithfully in the world well finally in his prayer Jesus moves on to pray for us who have been affected by the disciples ministry the people who in a sense are the inheritance of the work that they began 2,000 years ago and he first off prays that we would be one with each other as God the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were one with themselves and so therefore the Godhead in a sense it was a Godhead where three different personalities co-inherited together and expressed unity together and he prays that as we come to know the Father through the Son with the assistance of the Holy Spirit that we'd know the same unity that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit had enjoyed throughout eternity so as we love each other as God's people we actually show the love of God to other people and they get a sense of what it is to be connected to Christ and that's why loving action is so critical to our witness as Christian people we need to speak the word of God but we also have to model and demonstrate that word in the way we live so that people can see and discover Christ but as well as our Jesus prays that in a sense as he's gone to glory that God would take us to glory to be with him that we'd persevere to the end and we'd get to a point where we'd get to be united with him as he's now united with his Father and then he sums it all up in verses 25 and 26 of this great prayer he says righteous Father the world does not know you but I know you and these know that you have sent me

I made your name known to them and I will make it known so that the love which with you have loved me may be in them and I in them and in a sense it seems to me that Jesus sort of captures the secret to life in those two verses and what's the secret well the secret is that there's a God who

was a God of love who existed throughout eternity that was a God who actually enjoyed as I said before unbroken perfect relationship within himself a God who actually expressed love freely within the Godhead between Father Son and Spirit and that love that was expressed and evident between Father Son and Spirit is now made freely available to us and we can enter into relationship with God the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit because God makes himself known through his word and as he communicates to us and speaks to us we get to enter into relationship with him and we get to experience what Jesus had experienced throughout eternity so the perfect love that God had for his Father for his Son rather and the perfect love that the Son returned to the Father is made freely available to us so that we can enter into a loving relationship with God himself we can know God and be united to him in intimate relationship

God in us and Jesus in us I read the other day that a third of people in Britain would do almost anything in order to have some personal connection with their favourite celebrity we live in an era as you probably know when people are obsessed with celebrities and the cult of personality and according to this survey a third of the people living in Britain would do almost anything to have personal contact with Kylie or one of the other significant personalities and celebrities well in a sense what Jesus is saying here is that God actually opens up himself and his inner circle to us he gives us direct personal intimate connection with him and he allows us to enter into a relationship of love communication trust and commitment with his Father through the Son it's pretty amazing isn't it we don't have to do anything really stupid in order to have connection with God like some people might want to do with a celebrity God wants us to enter into a relationship with him and he's praying for us as we seek to express that relationship praying for us that we'd live in the world and be faithful to him as we live in that world and not withdraw from it praying that we'd be sanctified and preserved and build up in the truth of the knowledge of God's word and praying that we'd express unity and love in our meeting together and I hope and pray as you continue on in your faithful witness here that God might bless you in upholding his word and witnessing to Christ so that others can come to experience what we enjoy in a love relationship with God
Amen