

Date : 13 May 2018
Series : **Together we Stand**
Preacher : **Revd Anders Litzell**
Readings : Acts 1:15-17,21-26 Psalm : 1 Gospel : John 17:6-23

Jesus prays that we, who belong to His Name, would be one “as You, Holy Father, and I are one”. What does that mean?

We are on the cusp of Pentecost. We are on the cusp of the most comprehensive fulfilment of promises in one moment, that has ever taken place in the history of God’s salvation that will ever be until Jesus returns.

And Jesus last week tells us: Become one with me. And this week Jesus tell us: Become one with one another.

His disciples had no track record to speak of – they squabbled and bickered and maneuvered both against the crowd and each other – and in the middle of the commotion Jesus continues on his steady walk to where He is going, because He knows the disciples will follow, and learn, and be changed along the way.

But now we are at the culmination.

Jesus says to the Church, in this prayer: now you are it. In fact he says, now you are me. Everything my Father has given to me, I give you. My calling, my sending, my glory, my authority, my name. My Spirit.

The way we carry this gift is together; the closer we come to one another, the more of the Presence of God we can carry between us.

When we draw closer to Christ, we inevitably draw closer to one another.

Revd Anders Litzell

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. [...] As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

This congregation, the people of St Elizabeth’s, you are the reason Jesus prays this prayer. Jesus prays to the Father: “I’m asking on their behalf, I am asking on behalf of the world because they are yours”.

Jesus says that He was glorified in the apostles, and will be glorified in us.

This is the congregation where God’s glory will be revealed. Do you remember Moses, when was on the mountain of Sinai and asked God “Let me see your glory” and God replied – you cannot see my glory and live, but hide in this cleft of the rock and I shall cause all my goodness to pass before you.

God responds to Moses’ request to see his *glory* with “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

The glory of God is to reveal His goodness, to have mercy and compassion purely out of His own Father's heart. It is a gratuitous act of the Father's intent – I will have mercy, out of my own sovereignty. I will be show compassion, out of my sovereignty. Just because I choose to!

Jesus says of the disciples that he has been glorified in them. The Glory of God is revealed among those who do not only put God first but who choose one another; who do not withdraw from one another when the going gets tough but who say “God has put us together by His choice, so I will choose to keep pursuing a closer walk with my brothers and sisters.”

I told you once of this image that has kept haunting me for the last four years, this image of the people of God carrying His glory and His presence to the world – it is a vision of such hope and beauty, but also of a mystery I can't fathom because I don't know what the fulfilment will look like; what the glory of the presence of God would be revealed like.

In case someone wasn't here the first time, let me remind you. The picture was this:

- Waterfall – piece of wood, like a thick plank
- Carve a spoon (meh)
- We were there together – we were the wood
- Each plank bent out of its natural shape
- Two metal bands were put around what was now a barrel – the bands of love and commitment; the bands of choice and devotion to each other's wellbeing; the bands of the pursuit of a unity of purpose and a unity of heart.
- The glory of God was not contained in this barrel, but by way of this barrel, the land was watered and the glory of God was flowing like a mighty river. The Goodness of God was being revealed to all of creation.

This is the calling for this parish.

Those of you who have been here twenty, thirty, forty years have seen times of real glory in the past – but you have also seen the enemy's attempts at destruction. At one time dissent and division; at another time personal weaknesses becoming a destructive pattern; at another time personal sin ripping the closest relationships apart; at another time controlling behaviour and manipulation; at another time squandering of our resources.

I know it's not a fun list – and I don't know which of these upset you the more – but please, for a moment, let's put a screw cork on that and put it off to one side, because it's easy to get waylaid by past experiences. I want us to lift the gaze for a moment and ask another question:

Why is the enemy trying *soo hard* to undermine the ministry of this church?

Why is the enemy trying *soo hard* to undermine the ministry of *this* church? There are other churches, other congregations, that seem to muddle on just fine week in and week out – a comfortable existence.

I won't speak for other congregations, but I will speak for this one. This congregation; St Elizabeths' Westville; is pure gunpowder for the Kingdom of God. There is a calling on this congregation that is unlike any I have ever seen; and I've been around! There is a truly remarkable calling to reflect at once God's compassion and splendour; at once the glory and the humility of God; at once the riches and the radical generosity of God.

This is a congregation – YOU ARE a congregation give to reflect Jesus in the most beautiful way. Like it is in the nature of gunpowder to burn with a flash, so it is in your nature to reflect the glory and generous goodness of God. Both in the natural sense and the supernatural sense. This is who you are!

It is in the nature of gunpowder to burn with a flash, and it is in the nature of the enemy to pour water on the gunpowder.

There's been enough water poured on this congregation for the last however many years, to last a lifetime. The enemy won't stop, but like gunpowder dries out and receives back its power to burn, so have you come through with your nature unchanged. It is in your nature in the Kingdom of God, to be a channel for His mercy and goodness, for His love and generosity. It is in the nature of the enemy to delay, divert and distract you from living in your identity. I say delay, divert and distract – because he is unable to stop you. The gates of hell shall not prevail against you, says Jesus.

The gunpowder has dried again, and whatever is not is drying. Now is our time. Now is your time to shine; to burn brightly for the glory of God. Why now? Don't know, but now is the gift that we have been given. The gunpowder is dry. Now is your time to shine.

But how do we keep it dry? To go back to the earlier picture and mix metaphors a bit, to the barrel; because a barrel keeps water, or wine for that matter, safely inside – but it also keeps water safely outside, as when carrying ship's biscuits, or gunpowder.

So the answer is the same. The answer is each one of us choosing the uncomfortable work of humility and accommodation of each other; bearing with each other's weaknesses and celebrating our strengths. Not one of you is disqualified from being a plank in the barrel in this picture – and not one of you will find it easy.

The work of accommodating one another's quirks, un-evennesses and knot holes is so difficult. It is so difficult, in fact, that we cannot do it apart from the Holy Spirit. It requires a great deal of wisdom – and the Holy Spirit knows this, and gives it to all who ask. It requires love, yes, but what does love look like? It looks like this: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

If we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit's work of binding us together; if we choose one another in love; then we will be a people formed and held together by a bond so strong that what needs to stay in will stay in, and what needs to stay out will stay out. We will be a people against whom the enemy's best attacks will fizzle, a people that reflects God's goodness, and among whom His glory will dwell in splendour and majesty.

This is who you are, and this is who we will become, and the gates of hell will not stand against you.

Amen.