



30 April 2016

What on earth is union with God? (John 17:20-26)

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Tonight's reading takes us back to the Last Supper and Jesus' Farewell Discourse to his disciples recorded in chapters 14-17 of John's gospel.

Just before Jesus embarks on this final teaching two important events have occurred: Judas has left to betray him and Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet. I find the juxtaposition of those two events incredibly moving. How does he respond to betrayal and the prospect of what lies ahead? He empties himself – puts his own needs aside in an act of love and service – and then proceeds to prepare his vulnerable band for the inevitable sense of abandonment and betrayal, not to mention the persecution and scattering that will inevitably follow his death.

So Chapter 14 of John's gospel begins with the familiar words of reassurance: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?' Although this is often read at funerals, it has obvious application to this life. A fundamental human need is addressed here– the need to know there is a place for us, and for everyone else. It is the last part that is often the challenge.

In what follows he seems to be saying something like this:

Look I need to go away soon. But I will come back to get you. In the meantime I am not really abandoning you. I won't leave you orphaned. I know you won't see me for a while but I'll ask my father to send you the Spirit who will not only be a Comforter to you but also an Advocate who will testify on my behalf. It will be just like having me with you. He will remind you of all that I have taught you. Not only

that but he will show you how to respond when tough times come – as they inevitably will. In fact that’s why I have to go so that the Spirit can be with you always – so that I can be with you always. I wish I could help you see that you will never really be separated from me, any more than I am separated from the Father. In the meantime, show your love for me by loving one another.

Such a paraphrase obviously doesn’t do justice to what Jesus is saying in these chapters, but I hope it helps to remind us of the context of tonight’s reading (John 17:20-26). Although his prayer is addressed to God, it is obviously a prayer that they – and we – are meant to hear! It is all part of the teaching and gathers up themes that have been raised throughout these chapters.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may be all one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
(Jn 17: 20-23)

I have called tonight’s reflection, ‘What on earth is union with God?’ How does the heavenly vision translate into ordinary experience? What does that look like?

What Jesus is saying in these chapters about loving one another cannot be reduced to just behaving well or ‘playing nice’. Something far more radical is required – a profound shift in the way we see ourselves, God and those around us.

I remember an experience many years ago of being in a discussion group where one participant regularly came out with the phrase: ‘It’s all one.’ I found myself reacting to this because it seemed to dismiss what was happening in and between group

participants. It also seemed to be a theoretical statement divorced from ordinary human experience – I don't know whether that was a lack in my understanding or whether I was picking up on something that wasn't really integrated in her life. Either way, I now realise that I could have persisted in asking her, 'What do you mean by that?' Even better to add, 'How do you experience that unity?' because it is our shared human experience that connects us, not our belief systems. These often separate us – especially if dogmatically held. I now see that we were both right: the world is broken, messy and in need of healing *and* there is an underlying unity connecting us all. I also need to add that this person later, as a retired academic in her 70s, was going into dangerous parts of the world (e.g. a Sudanese refugee camp and the Thai Burmese border) to contribute to literacy development.

It has been suggested that our DNA is 99.9% similar to that of everyone else alive today. Not only that, but everything and everyone in the universe have their origins in stardust – we are all part of the fallout from cosmic explosions that occurred billions of years ago. The new science seems to suggest what the mystics have always known – that we are more closely connected with everything else than we realise. Obviously that isn't always evident in our world.

Many of you are familiar with the writings of Richard Rohr who has done much to disseminate teachings on non-dual awareness. He reminds us that we in the West live in a dualistic, polarised world where something is *either* this *or* that. While this way of thinking can be important in the classification, differentiation and analysis required by scientific research, it is not so helpful in theology. Yet Christian theology has been infected by this dualistic way of thinking from its beginnings. Examples include heaven/earth; sacred/secular; humanity/divinity. Non-dual (both/and) awareness is not so much about dismissing difference as about the capacity to hold both ends of the

polarity in tension. The language of paradox and metaphor enables us to do this, while labelling does not.

Rohr likes to say that 'God comes disguised as your life'. His is a world where everything belongs, nothing is wasted – even our sins, losses and humiliations are opportunities for healing, redemption and new life. 'All in the end is harvest,' as Dame Edith Sitwell puts it. But Rohr also likes to remind us that this isn't just about us or people like us (our tribe, as it were). He suggests that it is only as we 'receive the stranger, the sinner, and the immigrant, those who don't play our game our way, do we discover not only the hidden, feared and hated facts of our own souls, but the fullness of Jesus himself. We need them for our conversion' (*Yes And*, p.200).

When I visited Israel last year I had two lingering impressions: the deep and long-standing divisions between religious and ethnic groups today, and the incredible inclusiveness of Jesus, especially given his place and time in history. His growing inclusiveness is demonstrated not only in his teaching but also in his responses to others, especially the marginalised. And tonight's reading is the final articulation of his vision of an emerging unity into which future generations will be gathered. '*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may be all one.*' Admittedly there is a complex relationship to the 'world' in John's gospel, which we don't have time to unpack here. However, it is also a part of this vision. Ultimately he is sending his followers into the world to continue his ministry of healing and gathering in. It is not a closed system. I am reminded of that other sublime unified vision at the end of Revelation where the tree of life is planted on either side of the river of life, bearing its fruit in season and leaves for the healing of the nations.

This is not only a prayer but also an invitation to his followers to share this vision. And there is a sense in which we can only grasp what he means by participating in it, joining

in the dance. One place to begin is to notice when we are *not* coming from a space of oneness with God and with others – when our competitiveness, resentment, envy, fear or insecurity is protecting our own patch, erecting walls rather than opening doors. It is at this point that we may experience the limits of our compassion and love and realise our own need for grace, for ourselves as well as for our world. The important thing is that we continue to show up, not give up.

One reason we may resist union with God and others is that we fear that we will lose ourselves in the process. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 19th Century poet and priest, who had a wonderful grasp of non-dual ways of thinking and ongoing incarnation, reminds us that our true vocation is to give expression to what others (e.g. Thomas Merton) have called the true self:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

Where that happens, he concludes:

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.
(From 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire')

Another person who has a good grasp of non-dual thinking and our role in ongoing incarnation is James Charlton, Australian poet and academic. He begins his prayer-poem 'Apology to God':

I'm sorry for treating you as disembodied;
I forget that I am one of your embodiments.
I'm sorry for regarding you as indestructible.
Today I destroyed you
in a person I ignored.
Forgive me for treating you as unborn,
when you are constantly being born.

(James Charlton: *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection*, 2013, p. 118. With the permission of the author.)