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### **That They May Be One (John 17: 20-26)**

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Over the past few weeks in this season of Easter, we have been exploring key themes in the gospel according to John, focusing on distinctive ways in which John seeks to communicate who Jesus is and the difference he makes. If I had to sum up the heart of John's gospel, I would say it's his passionate desire that we, his readers, be drawn to the inside of divine life, the inside of the energy of creation. This, for John, is where Jesus is. He comes from God, he's returning to God, and he dwells among us in unbroken communion with his life Source. All he says and does expresses God – he is the 'Word' of God made flesh and his time is wholly spent 'doing the works' of the Father. And the whole point of his coming among us is so that 'where I am, there you may be also'.

Our access, for John, to 'going where he is' is believing in him – not believing as in mentally assenting to a weird proposition, but believing as in trusting, abiding with, letting ourselves be drawn deeper into him as we come to know him. The sign that this is happening will be our growing capacity to love, our becoming capable of loving as God does and is. And underlying this whole way of seeing Jesus, and the difference he makes is a profound awareness of the reality and promise of one-ness, union, communion. John is alight with the possibility of our being at one with God. Our being at one with other people. 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you', says his Jesus, 'may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one'.

In a moment I want to have a go at saying something more about this theme of 'union' and what it means to speak of being 'on the inside of the divine life', one with God as Jesus is one with God. But first – just a little context for tonight's

passage. Our reading forms the very end of what's called 'the Farewell Discourse' which comprises Jesus' last words to his disciples over four full and frankly rather convoluted chapters. The Farewell Discourse begins after Jesus washes his disciples' feet and foretells his betrayal at the Passover meal and it ends with him leading them out to the garden where he will be arrested. It is, in other words, Jesus' final teaching to his disciples, his way of preparing them for what's to come and seeking to sustain them in advance by words of instruction, warning and promise.

Chapter 17, the last section of the discourse, is also described as Jesus' high priestly prayer. It is addressed by Jesus, not to his disciples directly, but to God as he prays on their behalf. And this is a prayer, not only for his immediate circle, those purportedly with him at the time, but for subsequent generations of believers: 'I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they will all be one'. In other words, this is a prayer for the church, the church that will come into being after his death and resurrection, and whose constitution by the gift of the Holy Spirit we'll celebrate next week at Pentecost. We might see it as the culmination of what Jesus' seeks to impart, to make possible in the human world.

So with this in mind, let's come back to what it might mean to speak of being 'one' with God as Jesus is one with God. What's difficult about approaching this question, I think, is the danger of getting carried away into abstraction – it can all sound so lovely in theory, but we don't really know what it amounts to in daily life.

Perhaps a way of getting started is to contrast this promise and possibility of 'union' with what we might call a dualistic or objectified way of imaging and relating to God. According to John Main what Jesus is seeking to draw us beyond is the usual religious pattern of relating to God 'as an external reality, an object of devotional or intellectual projection'. Main says, 'No longer do we have to talk to God, to appease or petition [God]'. '[W]hen Jesus awoke to his union with the Father humanity passed beyond the stage of its spiritual infancy ... We are not only freed from the

need to see ourselves and God dualistically. We are actually summoned *not* to. ... Jesus calls us all into a new dimension of spiritual consciousness'.<sup>1</sup>

Well, this is challenging stuff – and maybe needs a bit of unpacking. Part of what's confusing is that we continue to speak of and to God in what sound like dualistic ways. We address God – as indeed Jesus does in his prayer. And what's true about this mode of address is that it signifies that God is not simply identical with us – God is, as James Alison puts it, 'another Other'. But in the Christian vision, this isn't the whole story. Through Christ, we're promised, God's own Spirit dwells within us – is at work in us to heal, integrate, draw us closer. And if this is so, then our prayers of petition, intercession, praise can't be primarily imagined as us over here talking to God over there, as if we're trying to cross a huge divide, or reach a distant being. No – not only are we praying to, but we are offering ourselves to be prayed in and so transformed. St Paul says, 'We do not even know how to pray but the Spirit prays within us'. Christian prayer means joining in with prayer itself – the endless self-communication of Father, Son and Spirit, which is the life of the world.

This way of speaking still sounds, I realise, pretty abstract. It only makes sense in the context of a certain kind of experience. And by that I don't mean an 'experience' of God from outside us (which would be to remain in the old dualistic framework). Rather it's about coming into a different sense of what we're involved in – a sense of participation, not so much handing over our shopping list or even feeling warmly devotional, but being wholly available, actively sharing in the yearning love of God for the world through the work of attention, the willingness to be a pain-bearer, and a space for hope. The journey into this new spiritual maturity, this participation, can be disorienting, painful – even for some, a dark night. Our old ways of relating to and knowing God seem to dissolve, and the deepening of faith can feel for a while like the loss of faith. But gradually some new consciousness dawns.

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<sup>1</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), pp.162-163.

In daily life, the effect of this new consciousness is to find ourselves feeling less separate and alone – there’s a sense of intimacy. We awaken in a new way to the beauty and mystery of the world and our belonging to it, and we know a deeper seeing of and compassion for other people. This is what growing in union with God actually looks and feels like in human life – and it’s why the call, the promise of being made one with God is interdependent with becoming one with one another.

This is not something we manufacture, some experience we try to imagine ourselves having. In fact, it’s best not to think about it directly at all. But it is something we may recognise as in process, unfolding within us. Meditation is the practice that enables us radically and profoundly to realise this promise. In silence, in self-forgetful attention to the mantra or the breath, meditation calls us to let go all that keeps us separate from Source of our life – the self-engrossed, divided self, and the habits of thought and feeling that keep us isolated and defended. John Main says that the ‘truth of human destiny that Jesus has uncovered for us is the new age of presence’.<sup>2</sup> Coming to share his consciousness, his communion with the Father leads us to understand ‘that we do not so much exist in relation to God as subsist within God as the ground of our being’.<sup>3</sup> This liberates in and through us something of God’s own creative energy, freedom and love. And this, I think, is what John is seeking to make available by his witness to the gift that Jesus is and brings, as he prays for us all: ‘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 with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’ ... Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, p.166.

<sup>3</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, pp.166-167.