

10am HC Sunday 1st June 2025

John 17:20-26, Acts 16:16-34 – Purpose and partnership mapped out in prayer

We're between Ascension Day and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the early church at Pentecost. So it might seem odd that our gospel reading takes us back to the Last Supper, and to Jesus' prayer, before he and the disciples went out, together for the last time, on that final, fateful evening. Jesus prays, not only on behalf of those who were with him that night, but also on behalf of us – ***those who will believe in me through their word*** – so let's see if we can make sense of it. Let's take a moment to find John, chapter 17, verse 20, in our bibles.

Here is Jesus praying aloud, for the disciples' and for our benefit. So they and we can know that everything that followed happened for God's purposes and through the partnership seen between Father and Son; a partnership in which we now play a part. The cross, the resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and the birth of the Church, the witnessing to Jesus' words, and to his life and death, his resurrection and ascension...

All of it happened on purpose, and all of it has come and will come to pass through partnership, and through and for the glory of God.

It is a rich and many-layered prayer that goes back and forth and round and round. So if we were to unpack this prayer in the style of Christmas Charades, or "Give us a clue" (remember the TV show with Una Stubbs and Lionel Blair?), would it be best to do it a word or an idea at a time, or should we attempt to do the whole thing?

Let's unpack it one idea at a time. All its components were visible in Jesus' ministry, and they have been highlighted for us already by John, in his Gospel. But seeing them woven together in Jesus' prayer helps us understand them afresh.

I went to Ely Cathedral on Friday to see the fabulous Threads through the Bible exhibition (don't miss this; it ends on 29th June).

We stopped for a while to listen to some musicians and singers rehearsing for that evening's concert.

And in a sense this prayer is like a deep and complex piece of wonderful music, packed with ideas, each of them worth a separate meditation, but all coming together in a beautiful whole, as first one motif and then another comes to the fore. The violins, the flutes, ... everything coming together in harmony and with purpose.

When we hear that Jesus prayed ***so that the world may believe that you have sent me***, we remember how Jesus told Nicodemus that ***God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***

And in the Prologue to John's gospel, so often heard at Christmas, we hear of ***the world [that] did not know him... of his glory, the glory of a father's only son ...*** and are reminded Jesus is the Word who was ***in the beginning with God.***

Jesus said to his Father ***the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.*** We can remember that only a day or so before praying this prayer, Jesus told Andrew and Philip ***the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*** That was the time Jesus prayed ***Father glorify your name***, and heard a voice from heaven say ***I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*** The crowd couldn't hear the words, so Jesus interpreted them for the crowd, saying ***now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out as I am lifted up [on the cross] to draw all people to myself.*** Glory comes with and through the cross.

With this prayer, we see that Jesus is not an actor who has to remember to move and to speak according to somebody else's stage directions. Jesus is not an agent given a mission and left to enact it as he thinks best. This prayer reminds us Jesus is the author, with his Father, of the biggest rescue mission of all.

Time and again, in Jesus' prayer we hear him say that this is how it is, with the Father and the Son and with us, ***so that....***

So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

So that ... those who believe in me through the word of the first disciples (meaning all of us) ***may be one, as [the Father and the Son] are one.***

[So] that we (you and I and everybody who believes in Jesus) may become completely one.

So that the world may know that [the Son was sent by the Father].

So that the world may know that we are loved as the Father has loved the Son...

So that the love with which the Father loved the Son might be in us.

So that Jesus might be in us.

Everything that would happen: on the cross, in the resurrection, at the Ascension, and at Pentecost; everything happened on purpose.

Many years ago, we went white-water rafting with the children. It was exhilarating and terrifying, and all we could do was to trust our guide. He could tell us which way to lean, how to ride through the bumps and the twists and turns. We had to trust in him to get us from A to B.

There are times in our lives when we have no idea what is around the bend; we scarcely have time to recover before we're knocked off our feet once again. Times when all we can do is to remember that Jesus, who prayed for us, will be our guide. When life feels turbulent, more rapids than river, this prayer reminds us there is a plan; a promise that we will one day ***be with [Jesus] where [he is] [able] to see [his] glory.***

And what does Jesus' prayer tell us about our part in all of this?

Astonishingly, we are given a share in God's glory, the glory that the Father gave to the Son, so that ***[we] may be one, as [the Father and Son] are one.*** Because, as fallible and weak as we are; indeed, because of our weakness and the things we get wrong, we are the best evidence of the love of God.

We needed the Father to send his Son to die for us on the cross so that we could be reconciled with our Father. It is our recognition of our need for Jesus that gives us joy in him and also in one another. We love God best by loving one another; by being patient and kind and encouraging and supporting one another.

It is John who recorded Jesus saying ***Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another [and] by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another***. We are made partners with God, made completely one with one another and with God, for the sake of this mission. The mission to share with the world the knowledge of the Father's love.