

John 17 v1-5, 20-26

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[0 : 00] Well, thanks again for inviting me to speak to you this evening.! It's good to be here, and I've known about you for many years, and I know one or two people here, Graham and so on, I haven't seen for many years.

So it's good to be here, and greetings from the folk at Emmanuel Church. We need to turn back to John's Gospel, Chapter 17, so you can have that open. And let's pray as we come to this passage together.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is truth, that it is life and blessing, it is health. It is not like any other word. It is a word that gives life because you are the life-giving God.

And we pray that as we reflect upon this passage, as we dig deeper into its meaning and intention, that your spirit would speak to us, challenge us, help us to grow in not just understanding, but also in likeness to Christ, the one who prayed this great prayer.

And it's in his great name that we pray. Amen. So I thought I'd talk about John, Chapter 17, and talk about unity, because unity is not really a problem at the moment.

[1 : 26] During this pandemic, everybody's just getting on fine, and there's just no pressure on any of us when it comes to that sort of thing. So I thought we'd look at this prayer.

Crisis, of course, like this pandemic, whatever you think of it, they test and stretch us. They test and stretch us personally. They test and stretch us as churches. And maybe, you know, you've got your own things where you've been tried and tested in these last months.

And as a fellowship, you've been tried and tested in different ways as well. And you might think of this in a number of ways, at a number of levels. And what I want to do is just kind of describe, perhaps, what you will think is the obvious.

And then we'll turn to John 17, and we'll look at what Jesus prays for in this prayer. And then we'll return to our situation, if you like, and then say, well, how does what Jesus teaches and shows and demonstrates in his prayer, how does that help us with the things that we're going to identify now? So clearly, at the moment, there's a real practical impact for us. Fellowship is difficult. Social distancing, our worship is impaired. It's not as, we don't have that informal time together.

[2 : 38] It's all a bit antiseptic. We're in, we're masked, we're out, you know, and it's winter, and all the rest of it. And then all kinds of temptations come with that.

We don't see so much of each other. And if there are little niggles there in our relationships, then we're tempted to amplify them. The small things become magnified because they're not attended to with the normal, if you like, oil of friendship and fellowship and getting on together.

Social distance does not make the heart grow fonder, does it? Not quite. If there's any suspicion amongst us, suspicions grow. So you've got all that kind of personal, interactive kind of thing which is going on in our homes, perhaps going on in our families, going on in our fellowship.

Temptations that perhaps otherwise we would not have thought about. Problems we may not have even noticed. Things in ourselves that we didn't think we had to deal with.

And then, of course, this all brings out different opinions. I'm sure there's no strong opinions in this church. There's certainly none in my congregation. So I don't know why I'm mentioning it.

[3 : 49] But just in case there were strong opinions here, we've found new ways to be divided. New things to be divided over. Perhaps our political differences rise to the surface in a way where they would just be in the background somewhere.

Perhaps our views about how different churches have dealt with the pandemic and what we think of this and that policy, whether within our own church or associated churches or the church in general, might affect the way that we feel about our brothers and sisters.

And then also what we believe about viruses and how they're propagated and immunity and vaccinations. You know, there's a whole swathe of reasons why we can have a strong opinion one way or the other and that becomes something that gets in the way of fellowship.

Things that would have been in the background as secondary or tertiary issues suddenly rise in their relative importance, at least in our perception.

And they become threats to our unity. And then there's a third area that we might want to think about. This crisis has exposed a number of gaps in our evangelical thinking, in our evangelical and reformed way of approaching things.

[5 : 10] Here we have a problem where there isn't a pre-packaged solution that we can easily call upon. There isn't a verse we can turn to that gives us the answer.

We've had to work through things which require lots of wisdom, lots of understanding, whole new situations that really there isn't any recent experience that we can call upon.

There might be some historical background, but we have to go back a long way. And it's not quite the same as the kind of things that we're dealing with.

So I think wisdom, we've been exposed in the area of wisdom. We've been used to thinking of, well, here's a thing and here's an answer. Here's a problem and the Bible says this.

And here's a situation where it's not so clear. It's not like you can turn to a passage that tells you how to deal with pandemics and all you have to do is implement the details. You've got to work it out.

[6 : 11] Churches have to work it out. We've got to be wise. The thing is, wisdom has to be worked on. Wisdom has to be learned. Wisdom comes through experience. And we haven't had this experience before.

So the answer is not straightforward. And so life gets a bit complicated. And then, if I'm honest, I think we've been exposed, generally speaking, in our political theology, our thinking about government.

Just to say we believe in a separation of church and state is just too general to really work through some of the detailed scenarios we've had to work on. What the intentions of government might be. What the purpose of government might be. Where are its limits? Can it tell us when and how to worship? Under what circumstances? That's quite a complicated issue. Our reformed forebears had to address those issues and had to talk about those things in previous centuries, but we haven't really had to think about that.

So we haven't tried to retrieve wisdom from the past. And we've had to think a bit harder and pray a bit harder. And then we've been challenged around, I will stop in a minute on this point.

[7 : 20] And then we've been challenged around, because we are preaching about John 17. I haven't forgotten that either. We're then challenged around the fact, what is our gathering for? What is the purpose of face-to-face in the presence of God worship?

Does it matter? Can it be done just as well online? Can it be done in virtual reality? Can it be done on the internet somewhere? Or must it be done face-to-face or mask-to-mask as it is at the moment?

What about sacraments? What about worship? What about fellowship? What about the physicality of our worship? What does all that mean? How does all that work?

How much can you give and take temporarily in order to make some kind of progress, hold something together during a difficult set of circumstances like these?

It's those kind of questions, which are, you know, just listing them and offering no answers at the moment, means that we have a very difficult time that we're in the middle of.

[8 : 24] And therefore, with those things in mind, I want us to turn across to Jesus' prayer in John chapter 17 and really ask, first of all, what kind of prayer is this?

It's a long prayer and it's Jesus' longest recorded prayer. But it has a... The first thing I want to say is that it has a parallel. And it has a parallel, perhaps, where we haven't really thought of before. It has a parallel with Solomon's dedication of the temple in 1 Kings chapter 8. You might think at first, how on earth does Jesus' high priestly prayer have anything to do with Solomon's prayer of dedication in 1 Kings chapter 8?

What do these people from Southgate believe? What are they bringing here to the west of London? But you can compare them a bit and lay them next to each other and there are some similarities.

Both prayers are concerned with a new temple. Solomon is dedicating the new temple that he has built under the hand of God and he's dedicating it for worship.

[9 : 32] That's the purpose of his prayer. But when you look at what Jesus is doing in his prayer, he lays out his prayer in two broad sections, two broad halves.

The first is a prayer for the apostles. But what are the apostles? They are the foundations of the church. And what is the church? The church is the dwelling place of God on earth after Pentecost, as it were.

And who does he then pray for? Once he's finished praying for his own disciples, who will be the apostles, the founding of the church. He prays for those of us, all of us, and all believers in successive ages.

He prays for the, if you like, the superstructure of the church that is going to be built on the foundation of the apostles. And of course, Jesus has already spoken about his own body as being a tearing down of a temple and a reconstruction of a temple on the third day.

So he's already got this way of thinking that what is the temple? Well, the temple is the place in Jerusalem that is going to be destroyed in AD 70. The temple is the body of Christ, which is going to be laid in the, crucified and laid in the ground and then raised again on the third day and ascended into heaven.

[10 : 47] What is the temple? The temple is the new body of Christ on earth, where the spirit dwells, that is the only source of life and health in this world. That's what the temple is.

And it's that temple that Jesus is dedicating, if you like, in his prayer in this chapter. There are some other common features as well. Both prayers begin with the prayer raising their hands.

In the first verse of 17, 1 Kings chapter 8, verse 22. Both are concerned with who will sit on the throne. Verse 5 of our reading talks about the glory that Christ will have again in heaven.

When Christ ascended to heaven, what did he do? He sat down upon a throne. Well, 1 Kings 8, verse 25, is concerned with who will occupy the throne. Both prayers are concerned with glory.

You will have noticed the word glory comes up over and over again in John, and it comes up intensively over and over again in our chapter here. God appears and promises to reside in Solomon's temple in 1 Kings chapter 9, and then in verse 5 here, he talks about the glory of God in the sun and the life of the people of God sharing in that glory.

[12 : 03] So there's a number of things that lead us to think, well, okay, there's a connection here. Jesus is a greater than Solomon. He is building a greater temple, a temple of people that will last for eternity.

That is his own body. This is a prayer for the church. This is a prayer from the king who will be exalted to the right hand of God. This is a prayer that Jesus prays for the foundation to be laid in his own apostles and disciples.

This is a prayer that he prays for us, that we would be one people founded on the apostles, rooted in Christ, in the resurrection life of Christ himself.

So Jesus prays for our unity. It's easy to read this prayer and think, well, Jesus prays for unity. Unity is some kind of, you know, general principle that floats in the air and never quite hits the ground.

But when we look at verses 20 to 26, we get a better idea of what Jesus means by this unity and how we should think of our unity together as one body.

[13 : 11] This closing section of the prayer is more directly about us. He moves on, as I've said, from praying for his own apostles and he starts to pray for the church in all ages and its unity.

And I want to say a couple of things about that and then go come back to our three broad areas that we began with and try and apply what we learned from the prayer to those three broad areas in our own situations.

That's where we're going to give you some comfort that I do have some idea about where we are going. So what is the basis of our unity? Verse 21. That they, that's us, may all be one just as you, Father, are in me and I in you.

That they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. This is a pretty dense prayer, isn't it? John's gospel is pretty dense.

The sentences are full and tight and you have to slow down and reflect upon what they say. What is Jesus praying for here? He's praying for something that is very, very profound indeed.

[14 : 21] He's not just praying that we'd all get along. That we'd all be good to each other. He prays a prayer that is really hard for us to grasp and understand but its truth is profound.

He says that the unity that he wants to bring about in his own body, the church of Jesus Christ, is grounded in the unity of the three persons of the Trinity.

Let me read the verses again. That they, us, may be one just as you, Father, are in me and I in you so the Father and the Son kind of live within one another such as they are one God that they also may be in us so that we may be in wrapped up as it were in the relation of the Father and the Son so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Then in verse 22, he adds, the glory that you have given me, I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one. What kind of unity? The unity that the Godhead shares amongst the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Verse 23, I in them and you in me that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved me even as you loved me.

[15:49] So Jesus isn't talking about some kind of unity that exists in the future somewhere that never really impacts life now in our lives now here on earth as the church militant as it were.

He makes it very clear in both of those sections, verse 21 and verse 22, that the reason for this unity is so that people may see it.

It's tangible, it's real and it has an evangelistic edge to it. In fact, it seems to be key to our effectiveness and in outreach into this poor fallen world.

Jesus says the Father and the Son are one through the fact that the one indwells the other which we find hard to conceive of. The persons of a trinity live within one another.

Their lives are completely engulfed in the life of the other and yet they are three persons and one God. And that they, we, also may be in us.

[16:53] Suggesting that the life of the church and this is where you've got to try and conceive this somehow, the life of God's people is taken up into the life of God himself.

And we cannot conceive of what that means. That is a great mystery. What does it mean? It's not just that God is dealing with us at arm's length, you know, all those poor little people down there.

I can save them, I can make their lives right, I can forgive their sins, I can change them, I can stop them doing things to each other, I can renew them. No. The unity of the church, the reality of the people of God is such that we are brought into the life of God himself.

We don't become God. We're creatures. We don't kind of get blended into God. It's not some kind of pantheism where we lose our identity.

It's rather that the people of God, the body of the human race that Christ died for, that Christ saved, is eternally brought into fellowship with the triune God himself.

[18:03] Now the reason for stressing that is this. That means that unity is not some kind of peripheral concern for us. It's not an edge case that we can safely ignore.

Whether or not we get along together, whether or not we really work at our fellowship, that we really try to be of one mind and one heart, that's not a peripheral thing.

That is a basic thing because the standard for unity is the life of God himself. The standard for unity is the life of God himself.

And Jesus says this because he says this is vital for the world to know the truth. It will not know the truth apart from the fact that we live out the concrete reality of the unity of the people of God in real ways that people can see, experience, know and touch.

That's the challenge of unity. So at this moment when all these other things are crowding into our minds, all these other concerns are crowding around, this is all the more important.

[19:11] This is all the more important that we grasp. Now you might look at this and say, well, this description of unity, it's so complete, it's so perfect and yet, let's be honest, you look at the church in history, you look at the denominations and the groups and boy, it's a mess, isn't it?

Let's be honest, it's a mess. Fragmentation is the best way to describe the modern church and there are so many things we could say about that but we don't have time to say that.

But the question is simply this then, maybe you're thinking this, so has Jesus' prayer been answered? Has Jesus' prayer been answered? Well, let's think about that.

Can Jesus pray a prayer that his father does not answer in the context of this? Is Jesus praying a prayer in John 17 that isn't going to happen?

Well, obviously no. Is Jesus praying a prayer that will only ever really happen in eternity? Well, in one sense, but he does say that the point of this unity is so that it may have an impact and effect now in the world.

[20 : 25] So it can't just be the way things will be in the future, in the end, excuse me, when Christ returns. So, what do we do then? We've got the actual state of the church, we've got what we are like, and then we've got the kind of state of the organized church, and that's complicated and messy and divided and broken and there's all kinds of doctrinal issues and now it's not just about doctrine, it's about morality, it's about sexuality, it's a really complex set of scenarios and we're at a very difficult moment on so many fronts.

What does this mean? How does this all fit together? Well, the first thing you have to say is that this unity, excuse me, is first of all a spiritual unity.

Now, you have to be careful with the word spiritual because too often it gets used to kind of turn everything into an ethereal thing you can't quite get your hands on that doesn't seem to have any kind of concrete reality in our lives.

It's a spiritual thing. What does that mean? Well, spiritual in the Bible means it's the product of the work of the spirits. That's the way we should generally think about that. So this unity is real and this is the point I want to perhaps to really stress to you because I think it's the one that's worth getting. Jesus' prayer has been answered. Now, it's answered progressively through history and it is not fully realized until Christ returns and the body, the bride is complete and is presented as glorified.

[21 : 59] That's clear but that doesn't get us off the hook of doing something now in relation to this truth. This truth is real because we really are united into the life of the triune God as his people.

That has to be true. Paul is always telling us that we are in Christ, in Christ, in Christ, in Christ. He wants to emphasize it's not so much that Jesus has come into your heart as that you have been grafted into the body, the new humanity, under a new Adam and you are in Christ and it's because you're in Christ that you've been kind of lifted up if you like into the life of God himself.

That's where you start from. That's the reality that cannot be negotiated with. That's the reality that is true. The challenge is how, to what extent can we bring our practical expression of unity, how close can we get?

And we should, without compromising truth, without selling the farm, without giving way on things that must not be given way on. We must work for that kind of unity and the place you do it is here. The place you start is not with theoretical people somewhere else, through an organization that doesn't help you. It's to do it with the flesh and blood people you're with. That's where you start because that's where people experience the unity of the church.

[23 : 28] Nobody says I came to Christ because I looked at the Episcopal structure of the Church of England and I realized that I understood John 17 again in a fresh way and this drew me to that doesn't work.

I met real people that loved me. I met real people that showed Christ to me. I was fed and watered and understood and listened to and Christ was presented not just in word but in deed.

That's what Jesus is talking about. That is the life of God in us that will have an impact upon the world. So if that's what we're talking about in John 17 let's come all the way back round to where we began to our three points.

There were actually three I know it sounded like there were 27 but there were three main points. In my head there were three points. And the first is this. Wind it back to the basic principles.

And the basic principle is in one sense we don't make unity. Unity is because we are in Christ. And if we are not behaving as a united people we are not being consistent with what it means to be in Christ.

[24 : 48] And that's where you start. If you have a difficulty with somebody brothers and sisters you start from the basis that we are both together in Christ and we work from there.

You don't have to work towards being in Christ. In Christ is where you begin. You work out your practical unity from the fact of our union with Christ.

So we don't make unity. Unity is what we are by definition as being Christians in Christ. Our calling is to live out that unity. unity that Christ prayed for.

And that in one sense that's what we have. And that's good news for us. Because it means the difficult things we have to deal with with one another are being dealt with on a very firm foundation. We're not like just floating parts that are trying to tie together bits that don't quite fit together very well. No we're standing on the same rock. We're united to the same Christ.

[25 : 46] That's where you start. Maybe if you have a dispute with somebody here. A brother or sister or whatever. Maybe when you try to sort it out it will be good to say let's remember we are in

Christ.

Now let's look at this problem. This difference of heart and mind and attitude or this dispute in Christ. Maybe that will help us come to these things in the right way.

The second thing I'd say about this is you want to start with the main things. You want to start with what the creed calls in the right sense small c the Catholic faith.

Not the Roman Catholic faith. You have to say every time as a Protestant every time you use the word Catholic you have to have brackets and you say not the Roman Catholic faith. Okay.

And everybody relaxes a little bit. Okay. Yes. Okay. We can move on. Catholic faith. In other words the faith the non-negotiable things that we all must believe to be saved.

[26 : 48] Not all the other stuff that we might think and understand which may or may not be right. That's not the point. There's a great fullness in the faith but we have to begin at the beginning.

Be careful of basing and you know we talked about lots of items at the beginning which if we're not careful become new things that we add as criteria for peace and unity in the body and that must not happen.

That truth the Catholic truth of the Catholic faith as it's found in the creed for example the historic Christian creeds won't take you away from unity but will draw you further in.

So don't allow all these temporary issues that I listed at the beginning loads of them don't allow all those things to rise above their level of importance. You may feel really strongly about this position and that whether to vaccinate or whether not to vaccinate and they are valid issues.

Let's be clear they might be very difficult and important issues. It's not that we just don't care it's that we don't raise things to a level beyond their importance.

[27 : 55] They don't become a criteria for fellowship. Remind yourself that we are working at a lived unity not a theoretical unity not merely a creedal unity even but a lived unity that can be seen and touched and experienced.

That's the first thing of our three final practical points. The second is this don't allow differences over practical circumstances such as the ones we're living through become your basis for unity.

Don't allow your politics to trump your theology or your commitment to Christ or the particulars of pandemics or whether you're a pro-mask wearer or whether you hate masks or whether you believe in the efficacy of lockdowns or whether you can abide lockdowns whether you are for immunisation or whether we should all just take a punt for it.

Whatever your view is that is not the point. That is not a criteria here and we must not allow it to become a criteria here. Don't allow these to become and then the attitudes that come with it.

We become a bit snarky. We become a bit too attached to our view. And I'm not saying what the views are because that's not the point. The point is our attachment to them. That's half the problem.

[29 : 14] And we become anxious and attached and cynical and maybe sceptical and we start to view each other in the wrong light because we have become too attached to things that are not the main thing.

Therefore, think the best of one another. Think the best of your elders. Even think the best of your pastor. Seriously. trust them.

Trust that they are trying to serve you well. That they are trying to serve the whole flock. That they are trying to build up the body. That they are deeply concerned for the unity of the bond of peace.

Look forward therefore to stronger fellowship. How about if we looked at this time and said do you know what? when the fellowship was taken away actually was enough taken away.

Do you know what I mean by that? Not that the government should have taken more. I don't mean that at all. What I mean was was there much to take? Was there much to take?

[30 : 22] How much of a loss was it? And then we could come back and say when we get it all back again, you know, the mask going, the two meter ruler doesn't need to be brought out every minute and we don't need to cross the road every time we see somebody.

When all that's over, how might we intensify our fellowship? Having been starved for a while, how might we have a greater appetite to be in each other's lives, to be in each other's homes, to show greater hospitality, to extend our table, to not just be private families that do not extend our table freely and openly to one another, that are not welcoming enough, I don't know you, so I can just throw stuff all over the room, you see, accusations and thoughts and everything with, and I'm off after this and Paul can clear up after me, but the point being, these are all the things that everybody has to deal with and this should be a positive time.

God has taken away some of the good things that we enjoyed and maybe what we need to do is say, well, we didn't enjoy those things enough when we had them, we now need to intensify, in those areas.

Last point, let's learn from our gaps. Remember I said there were gaps, gaps in our thinking, gaps in our wisdom, gaps in our ability to work with complicated issues.

This is not necessarily something that everybody in the room has to think about, but it's certainly something that leaders and others here were particularly concerned to address.

[31 : 53] we have had some gaps exposed. It's as if the tide's gone out and we've found some rocks that we didn't know about and some snares that we never saw before.

How about we say, well, we need to address those things. This highlights the fact that as evangelical and reformed Christians, we are not very good at wisdom. We are not very good at dealing with complicated matters.

We jump to our positions. we jump to our natural disposition. We don't listen to one another. We don't take time to work through complicated things. We want to get to an answer because we're evangelicals and we believe the Bible has the answer to everything, but that's become a very simplistic, find me the verse, show me the chapter, and for this one, there isn't a chapter, not because scripture doesn't address it, because it doesn't address it in the way that we have been used to addressing things.

And we have to learn to slow down, to pray, to dig deep into our heritage, to dig deep into our past, to dig deep into scripture in a fresh way that we have never done before, to take account of the whole Bible and not just the epistles.

What about being clearer on the importance of our gathering? All of a sudden we couldn't meet. I expect you were online for a while, imprisoned at home, and watching your pastor on the screen, as many, as everybody was at that point.

[33 : 23] And that raised the question, how important was our gathered worship to us? How important was gathered worship? When it was taken away, what did we think?

What did we miss? Not just the fellowship side of it, but the importance of it as an act of testimony, as an act of worship. What about sacraments? All of a sudden, no baptisms, all of a sudden, no Lord's Supper.

I have no idea what your practice with the Lord's Supper is here, so I'm just going to say it. If it was so infrequent that no one missed it anyway, then maybe that's a time to rethink it.

The sacramental life of the people of God brings us together in a concrete way. When we gather around one table and we take actual bread and we drink actual wine, that tells us that we can't have virtual church, we can't have a live stream forever, because you can't live stream that sort of thing, you can't live stream water, not yet anyway, and you can't partake over the internet, not yet anyway. What about our fellowship? But what about our worship? What about the concrete nature of our gathering? What about extending our lives to one another? There are so many challenges and let's use this time to reflect upon those things.

[34 : 45] And in our churches, when we're able to do more together, that we redouble our efforts to rebuild stronger, and I'm saying like Donald Trump on, rebuild stronger, better, no, I don't mean that, recover our Christian practice and our heritage and the teaching of scripture in real life ways.

These are difficult times, but let's remember, who did this? Well, ultimately, God has chastened us and God has done this.

And what we have to listen to in all the other noise and all the other secondary and tertiary causes that might cause this, that, or the other aspect of what we've discussed this evening, God has chastened us and therefore we should humble ourselves before him.

we should return to the richness of this prayer and we should submit ourselves to him in a fresh way, seeking to learn from what he has taught us by taking away, so that when he gives back, we may use and appreciate and take what he gives with grateful hearts.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.