

every Christian is a cookie-cutter clone of the other, but rather, *in the essentials* of who Jesus is, what He came to achieve, and what He expects of us (His followers), are the things on which there should be comfortable and full agreement. The Book of Common Prayer expressed this very clearly in the Intercession on page 75: *And grant that all they that do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love...*

Beloved, we can all find ways to get bent out of shape with one another. One person prays and calls God “you” instead of “thou”—offense taken. Someone wants to use the red prayer book instead of the green one—offense taken. Someone thinks the church building should look like this, instead of like that—offense taken. We can all find ways to separate ourselves from others or to blame others for the things we don’t like, can’t we? Yet that is not Jesus’ way. It’s not what He asked when He prayed *that they might be one, as we are one*.

Like prayer, unity of spirit needs to be intentional. It needs to be a sign that we love one another as God loves us. Unity of spirit seeks to build one another up. It is based on true Christian love, the kind of love that sees the face of Jesus in other people. Can any of us ever forget that Jesus died for them, just as He died for us? Are they any less worthy than we are?

I suppose that until the Lord returns, we can always expect to suffer for our faith. That is because Satan is a ravening wolf whose hatred of God is total. But like the early church, we can strengthen and protect ourselves by loving as Jesus loves, by devoting ourselves to prayer, and by expecting God to answer our prayers and to act in our lives. May our blessed Lord Jesus help us so to do

Χάρις τῷ θεῷ, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Ἀμήν

LECTIONS: Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11; + John 17.1-11

This last Sunday in Easter falls between the bodily ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into Heaven, and the outpouring, at Pentecost, of the Holy Spirit. It is a time of waiting, of anticipating God’s next step. The Scriptures we have read this morning deal with at least three inter-related themes: prayer, suffering, and unity.

Perhaps in one sense, the period between the Ascension and Pentecost is a bit like the period between Good Friday and Easter Day. Once again the apostles found themselves without the physical Presence of Jesus. Once again, they had to try to make some sense out of all the events they had experienced with Him. But this time, they knew that Jesus lives, and that one fact must have brought them untold comfort and peace.

In the Acts of the Apostles we read that they returned to the upper room where they were staying, and that they and those with them *were constantly devoting themselves to prayer*. [1.14] Prayer, as you know, is conversation with God. It involves some speaking and a lot of listening. Their prayer was *intentional*—full of intent. It was *constant*, not sporadic or episodic. And it was *devoted*. How many of us could describe our prayer lives in this way? Speaking for myself, my prayers fall far short of this standard, even despite the fact that I do pray often. Those in the upper room were effectively keeping vigil, anticipating that God was about to do something important, something that would include them. And so they watched and waited and prayed.

It costs to be a Christian, doesn’t it? It did in the first century and it does today. In Sudan, a woman named Meriam Ibrahim has been sentenced to 100 lashes plus eventual death by hanging for marrying a Christian man, this despite the fact that

she was raised in the Christian faith of her mother. Various agencies and governments around the world are trying to persuade the Government of Sudan to reverse the sentence and to set the woman free.

Almost weekly, we hear of attacks on Christian churches in various parts of the world. Recently in a number of predominantly non-Christian countries, churches have been bombed, and many worshippers killed.

And as you heard me say last week, even in Canada, Christianity comes under repeated censure from those who do not believe, and who would—if given the opportunity—eradicate any evidence of Christian faith through the land. Mercifully the pressure they exert is legal and social, so we generally don't need to be concerned for our lives or safety as Christians.

To us, and to those in every age who have ever risked following Jesus Christ, S. Peter has words of encouragement. *Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you*, he says. [1 Peter 4.12] *Cast all your anxiety on [God], because He cares for you.* [5.7] I love this: God *cares* for us! Not in the modern sense of being slightly fond of us, but in the classic sense of actually taking care of us. We have the promises of Jesus, that He will never forsake us, and that He will see us safely through all the twists and turns of this life, if we will let Him. Peter tells us to *discipline* [5.8] ourselves: in other words become a disciple, a student of the faith, and learn how best to use our faith and our relationship with Jesus.

He also warns us to *keep alert*. [5.8] Whenever we become complacent about the faith, our relationship with Jesus suffers. By keeping alert, we remain intentional about what we believe, and this helps us to focus on Jesus, to learn from Jesus and to gain strength and maturity in Jesus. And even when we do

suffer for what we believe, Peter assures us that *God... will Himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish* us. [5.10] We are not alone. A wonderful old children's hymn says

*To him that o'ercometh God giveth a crown
Through faith we shall conquer, though often cast down,
He who is our Saviour our strength will renew
Look ever to Jesus—he will carry you through.*

[Common Praise 1938. Hymn 642]

As we contemplate what it means to pray—and to expect answers to our prayers—let us turn our attention to Jesus, and remember how and what He prayed. John 17 records the High Priestly prayer of Jesus, from which we read this morning.

Jesus prayed that the Father would glorify the Son, so that the Son might, in turn, glorify the Father. The prayers that Jesus offered always sought either to glorify God, or to fulfil God's will. This is a good model for us to follow, whether we are praying together as a congregation, or alone. Even when Jesus prays to be glorified, He is not asking for anything new, but rather He is revealing what He already had in the nearer Presence of the Father *before the world existed*. [+John 17.5] Jesus, the Man, was evidently acutely aware of His eternal pre-existence with the Father.

We can learn so much from this prayer. *For the words that you gave to me I have given to them, Jesus prayed, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you...* [+John 17.8] Many today choose not to receive Jesus' words or the words of Scripture as having authority, yet in this prayer Jesus tells the Father that He was faithful to pass on the message, and that those for whom He was praying were faithful to receive it.

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. [+John 17.11] Unity of spirit needs at its root to include unity of belief. This does not mean that