

A big goodbye John 17: 6-19

Apart from the Arch Deacon last week this is our first Zoom church without Rob. How sad to say goodbye; we made the best of saying our farewells at a distance and over Zoom because of Covid but it's not what we would normally have done. How strange after all these years. How will we manage as we wait for a new leader? What should we do? How should we be?

Our reading from John's gospel is also a big goodbye. These verses are part of the conversation Jesus has with the disciples as he washes their feet, the night before he is arrested. It's quite a long conversation; the passage we read comes towards the end.

This is Jesus's prayer for his disciples, knowing this is his last chance to speak with them. Jesus knows what is going to happen the following day; he is facing a terrible death and yet the depth and intimacy of his relationship with his father shines through his conversation. Now, while everyone is gathered around, he is saying his goodbyes and begins to pray his farewell prayer for his dear friends, and later in the passage Jesus goes on to pray the same things for us – I'm praying not for them alone but also those who believe in me.

There are 3 things Jesus specifically prays as he leaves that might be important for us as Rob leaves and we wait for our new vicar: Jesus asks that they have unity, have joy and that they keep going.

Firstly unity - Jesus knows, with great sadness, that Judas will soon betray him, so he will be lost, a lost soul and lost from the group. And he knows there have been some tensions and in-fighting about who is the greatest. So Jesus prays for unity.

Secondly – to have joy, Jesus calls it 'my joy' – may they have 'my joy'. Joy might seem a strange word to use to describe a feeling the night before being arrested. Jesus trusts his Father in heaven and despite all that is about to happen this gives him joy. Jesus wants his disciples and us to have that deep-rooted security that comes from knowing and believing we are loved whatever happens.

And thirdly to keep going. Jesus knew all along his job on earth was to point people to God then to die and make a way for us to get right with

God. He trained up 12 people and this is his last chance to encourage the disciples to keep going, getting alongside people and pointing them towards God by following Jesus's example of being and doing, as they live out their everyday lives.

As Jesus prays these 3 things knowing he will not be there to keep the disciples safe, to protect their hearts and minds and help them make good choices, he asks God, the Father in heaven to be with them as they go through all that life throws at them.

It's not all going to be easy says Jesus, this world you are living in can be a difficult place - expect there to be times when you feel like you don't fit, times when people won't welcome the message you bring - but you have a critical mission and be encouraged because amazingly Jesus genuinely believes the disciples (and we) can do it!

In this prayer Jesus tells God how proud he is of the disciples – “glory has come to me through them” he says, look at what they have done Father, they have brought me glory, I'm so proud of them.

This is astonishing if you think about what the disciples have done and understood up to that point – they have not understood much of Jesus teaching, they have not grasped who He is. They are ordinary people with sharp tempers, internal squabbles and rash behaviour – but they have been faithful – and Jesus is proud of them. He is proud of each one of us.

So much of Jesus prayer is relevant to us.

Especially now that Rob and Philippa have gone, we need unity. We're in this together. We have various task groups set up to look after caring for people, worship, children's work and so on. Everyone involved is doing their best and a lot of people are stepping out of their comfort zone – in one of the groups a member said “I'm not sure I can contribute anything. I'm not sure why I volunteered, but I'm here”. This person's willingness brightened the whole conversation and lifted our spirits.

I've also been in some groups where there are some underlying tensions. These tend to bubble up when everyone is stretched.

Not everyone has capacity to be involved directly; everyone, however young or old can share a smile or word of encouragement. In unity, we're all in this together.

And we all need to know the kind of joy that does not depend on circumstance, the joy that comes from knowing and believing God accepts us and loves us just as we are. Rosemary recently shared a song on St Andrew's prayer WhatsApp that brought me joy because it reminded me of this truth, called Come as you – Come as you are, that's how I want you..my love sets no limits - just come as you are. ..

And of course, we are to keep going with that critical mission of pointing people in our community towards God. We are not to withdraw and simply wait for the new vicar. Rob has taught us well and we know how Jesus wants us to be and what Jesus wants us to do in our everyday lives.

The Acts passage is a very practical example of an answer to Jesus's prayer. The disciples recognise the need to replace Judas to keep going with their mission so together and in unity they prayerfully approach the decision and draw lots to decide who this person will be. Mathias is chosen and they all continue to point people towards Jesus.

Somehow, through the grace of God and the work of the Spirit, Jesus has indeed been glorified by these disciples. However imperfect they might have been, the church which began with 12 people, continued to grow.

Now I'm not suggesting that we adopt the custom of drawing lots to select our new vicar, but the decision will certainly be prayerful and in the meantime we will keep going with our mission so let's consider how we too can be the answer to Jesus's prayer.

As we wait let's consider how we can choose unity over our personal agendas.

How we can choose deep rooted joy and expectation?

And how we can shape our lives to point people to God.

Just before Rob left I asked him what he would pray for us, and he too offered three things as he said...

My prayer for you all is:

That you go on treating one another in love – even when there is the odd misunderstanding or failure of communication along the way.

That you go on looking out, serving, and reaching out to those in the community who don't yet know Jesus, and not become more inward looking - this is always a danger for a church.

That you continue to pray for and support our mission partners and the worldwide church, where needs are greater than ever.

And all the people said - Amen