

Reading: John 17:20-26

Loving God,
open the meaning of the Gospel to us in a new and fresh way today.
Amen

The story is told of an old man who was very ill, and the family called for the vicar. As she entered the sick man's bedroom and went to sit down, she noticed another chair on the opposite side of the bed, a chair which had also been drawn close. The vicar said, "*Well Donald, I see I'm not the first visitor today.*"

The old man looked up, was puzzled from a moment, then recognised from the nod of the head that the vicar was talking about the empty chair. "*Well vicar,*" the man said, "*many years ago I was finding it hard to pray, so I shared the problem with the vicar. He told me not to worry about kneeling or placing myself in a pious position but to just sit down, put a chair opposite me, and imagine Jesus sitting on it, then talk to him as you would a friend.*" The aged man added "*I've been doing that ever since.*"

A short time later the daughter of the man called the vicar. She explained that he had died very suddenly, and she was quite shaken.

"*I had just gone out for an hour or two and came back and found him dead.*" Then she added, "*His hand was on the empty chair at the side of the bed. Isn't that strange?*" The vicar replied, "*No it's not strange, I understand.*"

Today our Gospel reading invites us to pray with Jesus. We are in the very privileged position of being able to come alongside Jesus and listen in on his prayers.

This small piece of John chapter 17 is part of a much bigger section which is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. It is set in the context of his last meal with his disciples. We learn much about the priorities of Jesus as we listen to him praying. One might expect his prayer on the night he was betrayed to focus on his own pending death and sacrifice. Instead, this prayer totally focuses on his beloved disciples. Once more, he appears not to be concerned about his own well-being and protection but concerned for those he is leaving behind. The climax of the prayer begins in John 17:20 when Jesus prays for the unity for his followers. The phrase "*that they may all be one*" is a dream. It's the heart felt desire of Christ that we his followers might be one.

Indeed, he prays that we might be one so that the world might believe. We could put this more simply when Christians are one then others can believe. In a doubtful world, doubtful of Jesus, doubtful of faith, the disunity of Christians is a powerful reason not to believe. "Look at those Christians they can't even agree," People say to themselves and sometimes

they say it out loud. There are so many varieties of what we call Christian - because we keep dividing.

One newcomer to a town was given a tour. The driver said proudly "*Look at all the churches we have here in this town. We really love Jesus.*" He hadn't counted on the kid in the back seat whose voice added, "*Yeah we really love Jesus, it's just each other we can't stand!*"

But the reverse is true too. When Christians put aside their differences then others come to believe. You, like me, will have been involved in services that bring together lots of different Christians and experienced the powerful renewing effect that has on our faith.

When we pray alongside Jesus, we begin to get shaped by his priorities. His priorities become our priorities. We begin to pray less for ourselves and more for others. We begin to talk less and listen more. We begin to be transformed and become more Christ-like. We also begin to worry less about getting our own way and being right.

The Christian life is not about what we know but about who we know. We know Jesus, and Jesus is calling us to know him more and more, and to become one with him and the Father, so that we might grow as one together.

This unity starts in our hearts. It can be seen in our lives. One such life was *Julian of Norwich*. She was born into a time of terrible wars and plagues in 1342. It was like today but without any vaccine! She got terribly ill at age 30 The priest was called, and he held a crucifix for her to gaze at to find comfort in as he did the last rites. No doubt the priest had done it many hundreds of times before. The following day she didn't die but received 15 visions.

In these visions or revelations, God set before her a profound insight into the love of God. She retired to a cell attached to the little church in Norwich and spent her life in prayer and in the counsel and comfort of others. Her counsel became famous, and many notable people sought her advice. But it was her reflections on divine love that are her greatest legacy.

Compassionate and insightful she was among the very first people to write in English. She wrote. "*I saw that Our Lord is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds us and embraces us, that his tender love completely surrounds us never to leave us.*"

Christ's will for us is that we should seek for and trust him, rejoice and delight in him, while in turn he will strengthen and comfort us until such time we realise it all in every fact. As I see it the fullest joy, we can have springs from the marvellous consideration and friendliness shown us by our Father and our Maker through our Lord Jesus Christ, our Brother and our Saviour."

But her most famous saying of all is this: "*Sin is inevitable, but I saw that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*"

She died sometime after 1416 and is celebrated on May 8, the day of her visions.

Today's Gospel then is both a comfort and a challenge.

It is a comfort in that we know that Jesus is ever alongside us praying with us, the unseen guest every time we pray.

The challenge is that we might be one so that the world might believe.

The challenge and the comfort are one and the same because neither can be realised without prayer.