

Many of us have experienced the feeling that comes over us when we know that somebody has been praying for us. Those facing surgery enter the operating room with greater confidence knowing that friends and family are praying for them. Those who survive cancer or some horrendous accident will often say, “I believe that all of those prayers said for me made a huge difference.” Those who experience some dark night of the soul or walk through the valley of the shadow of death find great comfort when someone says, “I’ll be praying for you.” Even priests — or perhaps we should say especially priests — draw strength from the prayers of others. Is anything more wonderful than knowing that somebody is praying for you? Maybe there is. What may be even more wonderful is when the One praying for you is none other than Jesus himself. The disciples experienced his prayers firsthand. He had gathered them in the Upper Room, you recall, where he began to prepare them for his departure. He picked up a towel and a basin of water and washed their feet. “I have set you an example,” he said to them, “that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). He gave them new commandments: “...do this in remembrance of me.... and love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). He told them about the many dwelling places in the Father’s house and how he was going to prepare a place for them. He warned them to be wary of the world and its corrupting influences, and he challenged them to define themselves, not according to the standards of the world but according to the standards of the gospel. “If you love me,” he said to them, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). He gave them the promise of his presence, the presence of the Advocate — the Holy Spirit — to be with them forever. He warned them about the persecution they would face (John 16:2). And then he prayed for them.

The seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John records that prayer, in which Jesus prays first for himself and his own impending “glorification” on the cross. Then he prays for his disciples. Finally, he prays for all of the future faithful — people like us, in fact — who one day would receive the gospel message like a fine family heirloom which has been passed on lovingly from one generation to the next. It is a wonderful prayer, but even more wonderful is the knowledge that he prayed it for his disciples and for us and, therefore, for the church. There is nothing more wonderful than knowing that somebody is praying for you, especially when that somebody is Jesus.

According to John 17, Jesus prays for a number of specific things: for safety and protection, for the joy of faith, for victory over the powers of darkness. But the one thing he prays for twice is for unity, for oneness. For the disciples he prays, “Protect them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11). Later, when praying for the future faithful, he asks, “... that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

If there is one prayer, which we Christians have always needed, it is the prayer for unity. Clearly, the disciples needed a prayer for unity. Sometimes we think that the disciples were one big happy family, but such an assumption is far from the truth. Just remember whom Jesus invited to be his closest friends and followers. For example, one of them was Levi who is sometimes called Matthew the tax collector. No one was more hated in Jesus’ day than a Jew who had gone to work for the Romans, collecting taxes from his own people to turn over to Caesar. Can you picture Matthew walking to work in the morning, the neighbours looking the other way as he passes by, the children spitting in his path or throwing stones at him, the local dogs growling at him in anger — even their dog food is taxed! There was no one in Jewish society more despised than a Jew who had sold out to collect taxes for the Romans, and Matthew was one of them.

Sitting there in that Upper Room was another of Jesus’ disciples, Simon the Zealot. We don’t know much about Simon; the New Testament just doesn’t say. But we do know something about the Zealots. The Zealots were intensely committed religious nationalists of the ancient world. Completely dedicated to Jewish law and custom, they hated foreigners, especially the Romans who were taxing the lifeblood out of the nation. Undoubtedly, Simon hated tax collectors like Matthew more than he hated the Romans. Yet here they are in the Upper Room, Matthew the tax collector with his briefcase stuffed with tax forms and Schedules and Simon the Zealot with his lapel button which says, “Palestine — Love It or Leave It”! Can there be any doubt why Jesus felt the need to pray for the unity of the disciples? Unity would be a struggle, even among his closest followers.

Some 2,000 years have come and gone and we modern-day disciples of Jesus are still struggling for unity. We continue to fall short of the high hope of our Lord’s Upper Room prayer for oneness. Not long ago a priest friend of

mine described his recent trip to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was built on the very place where tradition says Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead. That church should be a place of intense spiritual vitality and power and for many people it is. But what other people experience there is not the power of the gospel which overcame the grave but contentious clusters of Christians each claiming this sacred site as their own. It is like a war-zone where this group claims this part of the church and that group claims that part. The church is such a battleground that for the last hundred years or so, they haven't even let Christians have keys to the place. Instead, a certain Muslim family has been charged with keeping the keys, and when things get really bad, they just lock it up!

And what can we say about the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland who are forever fighting with each other? What can we say about the recent history of Anglicanism with its constant quarrelling between national churches and even within churches with one group breaking away from others, sometimes over large issues and sometimes over small issues? Even in our backyard, where one Archbishop mentioned to me that "it was easier to turn a battleship in the Yarra than get the backing of the Melbourne factions in synod". What do all of these disputes and frustrations say about the unity of the Church other than that somehow we have fallen short of the unity for which Christ prayed in the Upper Room? Will we ever resolve our deep divisions over issues like social action and homosexuality and the methods we use to interpret the Bible?

"The glory that you have given me," Jesus prayed to God, "I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one ... so that the world may know that you have sent me" (John 17:22-23). This is why Jesus prayed for unity — not so that diverse Christians can sip coffee at the morning tea after church, nor so that we might all be the same — unity does not mean uniformity. Rather, Christ prayed for Christian unity so that the world might know that God sent Christ. Our Christian unity is supposed to say something to the world about our witness and to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ through all of our lives and actions. Not just that we are a nice bunch of people- there are loads of those groups around. I have heard much talk over the years about how the Church might better connect with the community it is in, whilst having little regard to what message is presented or what we might be inviting the community into.

The Good News which John spells out in the seventeenth chapter of his Gospel is that the Risen Christ continues to pray for us, continues to foresee our unity when all we can see is division and dispute. In this regard, he reminds me of a certain priest who visited a young man in his thirties with his family, who was confined to his home because of an injury to his brain. He lived his life in a coma-like state, unable to respond to anybody or anything.

The priest would talk to this man — as if he could understand. Then he prayed for the man — as if the man could know that he was praying. The father of the young man the first time the priest visited the home wanted to say to him, "You fool, don't you know about our son?" But then it dawned on him that the priest did know. He cared for their son as if the son were whole, because he saw him through the eyes of faith and, therefore, saw him as already healed.

Christ sees the church the way that priest saw the young man, not as the fractured and fragmented fellowship that we so often are, but as the unified body of believers that we by God's grace are yet to become. And so he continues to pray for us, that some day we will all be one, and not so much one in doctrine, but one in Spirit, one in respect for one another and our views, one in love for one another and for the world. As the old spiritual puts it, "They'll know we are Christians" — not by our uniformity of doctrine, hip new ideas, social action, community involvement etc- Rather, "They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christian by our love." And miracle of miracles, Christ's prayers for our unity are making a profound difference. In the last 50 years the ecumenical movement has made great strides in bringing Christians closer together. Can you imagine what we did at the Carmelite monastery in March for the Kew Festival with the other Kew churches would have happened over 50 years ago?

The risen Christ continues to pray for the unity of Christians, and little by little those prayers are bearing fruit. There is nothing more wonderful than knowing that someone is praying for you, unless that Someone is none other than Christ himself! Fr Robert Newton