

Transcript of extracts from the service on 24th January 2021 at 6:30pm for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Readings

John 15:1-17, John 14:23-27, Revelation 7:9-12

Address by Christine Flood

Good evening. I think we're all agreed on one thing: these are extreme times of uncertainty, fear and insecurity. And today's readings speak to our situation. When has there ever been more of a need for unity among our nations, our governments, our places of worship, and within our families and friends? Jesus is with His disciples as He prepares them and Himself for parting. During this time of intensive teaching and training of the disciples, for when He would no longer be with them in the flesh, Jesus concentrates on one main theme: He'll be with them in a new way. It's a promise that we need to hold on to as we journey through difficult times. He promises, "I will not leave you as orphans. I am coming back to you.¹ The Holy Spirit, whom the Father sends in My name will teach you all things."² In other words, "I will never leave you alone."

If you're a parent, you'll maybe know that around 10 months, babies start to feel what's called separation anxiety. Leave a child with someone unfamiliar, and the tears flow. They want the one they know and love best, and no-one else will do. Babies feel this anxiety because they're starting to realise they are separate beings, and it's scary! Babies who are loved and given the resources to cope, learn to deal with their anxiety and face the world with strength and curiosity. Jesus' followers were exposed to something like separation anxiety. Jesus is going to leave them. How will they know what to do? The five chapters from John 12 to 17 are full of Jesus' leaving instructions, teaching and reassurance. A tender, nurturing Jesus gives His followers emotional support, even as the shadow of the Cross lay over Him.

Perhaps we sometimes need to allow ourselves to feel the impact of this tenderness. Do you remember the line in the Beatles song, *Eleanor Rigby*:

Look at all the lonely people,
where do they all come from?

It captures our deep-seated fear of being alone. Another song we know from Simon and Garfunkel says,

I wish I was homeward bound.

And we all know the phrases 'home comforts', 'charity begins at home', 'coming home', 'home is where the heart is'. So many people feel groundless and fearful, with no home for their heart. We need a central resolve, a central focus and a central motivation, all of us with different skills to reach myriad peoples, and from which we can advance to survive together as a whole.

Jesus addresses our fear: "My peace I give you."³ His followers will not only have the reality of Christ's ongoing spirit, but they will have each other. Furthermore, the Spirit is not a substitute for Jesus' presence. With Jesus as the vine, they and we as His branches will know His living presence in the mutuality of love. Of course the real meaning of 'home' should be a place of safety, comfort, and shelter that gives us identity and security. And it's hard, it's not always like that. But beyond the walls of our physical homes, we need to make Jesus the vine, our home, from where and from whom we as branches can reach out. Because Jesus also points out the disciples' responsibilities. If

1 John 14:18

2 John 14:26

3 John 14:27

they love Him, they will keep His commandments. This image is not a harsh tit-for-tat 'obey me or you won't get my love'. It's a flowing love, between God, Jesus and His followers. He says,

You didn't choose me. I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name. This is my command: Love one another.⁴

We're loved by God and Jesus reveals this love to us, and we're to respond, from love rather than fear, to love God with all that we have and, as His branches, our neighbour as ourselves. When we do, we experience God's love. But that's where all of us can realise that nothing of what we do or have done can be successful without a lot of prayer and lots of talking to God. When we don't do His jobs around His home, such as reading the Bible or praying or when we don't open and share our home, i.e. love each other or share Jesus with others, then we're not doing what Jesus says. After His resurrection appearances, Jesus wouldn't be physically seen, but would be embodied within the community of believers.

Jesus asks a lot of His disciples and seeks their trust. Perhaps sometimes we might feel that God asks too much of us. Or maybe we expect more from ourselves than God does. Which way you look at it? Jesus asked much of His disciples because they'd grown to trust and love Him and felt able to take risks with Him. Losing Him would be hard, but they would have what they need to cope. Jesus doesn't ask more than they have the resources for. Isn't the same true of us? Repeatedly, Jesus talks about love, as that which will keep them together, and in touch with Him. So, if we are to be Jesus' branches, we need to know what our real home is: our real foundation, the true vine.

It's like a ripple effect. Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography, speaks of setting up an underground organisation that would keep communication, information and education alive between communities, even when the government banned black people from meeting with others. He set up a steward for up to 10 houses in a street, a street steward for more than 10 streets, and then a chief steward in charge of a bigger group of streets. His system kept people in touch, not isolated, or without a home, or with no people they could trust. It gave a feeling of some security in one insecure situation.

And then of course there's the ripple effect of the early church, spreading out across the world. What more central, secure and unified motivation for survival can there be than Jesus, the true vine as He says, to whom we belong, and from whom we can branch forward together.

"If anyone loves Me he will obey My teaching."⁵

"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine."⁶

"We will come to him and make our home with him."⁷

"If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit."⁸

Jesus' imagery evokes family relationships, but applies beyond. In any family or relationship there are boundaries and regulations and obligations. But families come in all shapes and sizes, many spread apart by employment, unemployment even, hardship, and indeed by COVID today. The same is true of Christian communities. Being connected with Jesus' followers with love at the centre often brings us into relationship with the most unlikely people. Who are those people for us? Some families can be damaging places. As we form new connections in and beyond our churches, how can we ensure that struggling and hurting people get the support they need? How do we create nurturing relationships that neither

4 John 15:16-17

5 John 14:23a

6 John 15:4

7 John 14:23b

8 John 15:5

smother nor cause unnecessary pain? How do we make sure we listen to those who've had damaging experiences? Is love the answer? And if so, how can we move from its sentimental connotations and put this love of God into action? How can we build stronger relationships within the congregation as well as look beyond it? Who are the people who annoy us most? Can we learn more about them in order to understand them better?

The theologian Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff wrote that to love each other is to feel with others and identify with them, to persevere until the end in love, in faith, in goodness of the human heart. It's to not fear being critical, challenging religious or social situations that do not humanise human beings, or make them free for others, or for God. Now that the Spirit is here there's no excuse. We have the truth within and alongside us. As Paul said, if we don't tell someone about Jesus, they might not hear about Him⁹. From wherever we are, we can be witnesses, friends, a support, accompanying, showing God's love. Of course there is pain, the million other difficulties. But that's where having the mission centred on the eternal home, centred on Jesus, the vine, comes into its own. That's where we can be sure with certain hope, that even if times are very hard, Jesus is in them with us.

So, we need to be aware of the culture around us; be involved in our local communities, as many of you are; talk with whoever will listen; use familiar language; not criticise non-Christians for their beliefs, but start from where they are; give an account of what God in Christ has done for us, and what we need to do in response; and be assured by the example of Jesus Himself, with Jesus as our real home, the vine, we have to be His branches, laying foundations for others to discover Him as their home. He says that to live a life of love is to live in obedience to God, because love is more than feelings: they can't be commanded, but attitude and action can. God continues to live in the world through those who love us Jesus loved, and loves. In this sense, Jesus is the only way to the Father, for He is the One who has shown and taught that the Father is revealed through humble, symbiotic love.

In summary, then, I repeat that these are extreme times of uncertainty, fear and insecurity. When has there ever been more of a need for unity? We need a central resolve. What more central, secure and unified motivation for survival can there be than Jesus, the true vine, as He says, to whom we belong, and from whom we can branch forward together. We are intertwined, as branches of His love that feeds and strengthens, that ultimately will rescue us. Jesus said, "I will come to you."¹⁰ Surely there's no greater motivation and security than that. So let us love each other, as He loves us. And then, as Revelation says of the multitude of nations, we shall join in saying together,

Amen!

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength
be to our God forever.

Amen!¹¹

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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Please note: inclusive language was not introduced into the NIV until the 2011 edition.

Note: some Biblical extracts (not separated from the main text) are paraphrases.

9 Romans 10:14

10 John 16:18

11 Revelation 7:12