

## JOHN 17: THE PRAYER OF THE SAVIOUR

[Chelmsford 27 March 2011]

If you knew you had just 24 hours to live, what would you do?

- Would you go out for a really good meal?
- Would you meet up with your best friends?

Interestingly Jesus did both of those things. The night before he died he had a really good meal – roast lamb with all the trimmings, and wine to boot. What’s more, he spent that evening with his 12 closest friends.

But this wasn’t all. He spent a good deal of his time praying.

In the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke we have a record of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, immediately following the Last Supper.

It was on that occasion that Jesus pleaded with God to take from him the cup of suffering – Yet **“not my will, but yours be done”** (Luke 22.42).

Luke tells us that **“in great anguish, he prayed even more fervently; his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”** (Luke 22.44).

Jesus was no superman – he was no divine robot. He was not God pretending to be man. He needed to pray – he knew in his own strength he could not achieve his Father’s will.

John in his Gospel does not record Jesus praying in Gethsemane

But he does record Jesus praying. Indeed, in John 17 we seem to have a fairly full transcript of his prayer – it is certainly the longest recorded prayer of Jesus – it is 26 verses long.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century this prayer is traditionally called *‘the high priestly prayer’* – for in this prayer Jesus prays for his disciples. And yet it is not just a prayer for others.

For Jesus begins by praying for himself.

### 1. JESUS PRAYED

John writes: **“Jesus looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you... Father! Give me glory’”** (17.1).

Notice first the way in which Jesus addresses God: **“Father”** he says.

Six times in this prayer he calls God **‘Father’** (vv1, 3, 11, 21, 24, 25).

And what he does here, is true of every occasion when he prayed.

In the Gospels there are 21 prayers of Jesus and in all but one he speaks of God as Father.

The one exception to this was when he was dying on the Cross – there in agony he calls out to God using the words of Psalm 22.7: **“My God, my God, why did you abandon me?”** (Mark 15.34). Maybe at that point, as he was bearing the sins of the world, he felt himself distant from God – even forsaken by God.

But at all other times, he felt incredibly close to God. So close in fact that he called God **‘Abba’**. Abba is an intimate family word which a child uses of its father – akin to our word **‘Daddy’**, save many of us as we grow up cease calling our fathers **‘Daddy’**, whereas the Jews could address their fathers as Abba whatever their age.

Jesus dared to call God ‘Daddy’ – he dared to call God ‘Father, dearest Father’.  
If ever we needed proof that Jesus knew himself to be the Son of God, it is the way in which he called God ‘Father’.

But the very fact that in his prayers Jesus dared to call God Father did not mean that he was ‘chummy’ or ‘over-familiar’ with God.

It is significant that in John 17.11 Jesus addresses God as “**Holy Father**” – and a little later in v25 we find him calling God “**Righteous Father**”.

To use the jargon, here we have a combination of God’s transcendence and God’s immanence. In the words of one commentator (Derek Tidball, *The Message of Holiness* 136): “**Holy draws attention to God as above us, different from us, awesome to us, sovereign over us and altogether separate from evil. ‘Father’ draws attention to his nearness to us, his involvement with us, his grace towards us, his pleasure in us, and to his nature as God revealed him to us**”.

Or to use a picture, high voltage electricity needs to be challenged into our homes through a transformer if it is to be useful to us and not to kill us instantly. So the holiness of God needs to be channelled through the ‘transformer’; of his grace if we are to be made holy rather than merely annihilated by it.

Yes, we can come to Almighty God, the God who created heaven and earth and who sustains the universe in its being, can call this God Father.

Amazingly we can experience his power in his lives – but we do so, only because of his love and grace, his love and grace displayed supremely in Jesus.

Indeed, John inserts into Jesus’ prayer these words: “**Eternal life means knowing you, the only true God, and knowing Jesus Christ whom you have sent**” (v3). How can we know God?

We can only know God as we see him in Jesus.

As John declares at the end of the introduction of his Gospel: “**No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known**” (1.18).

The history of religion is the story of our search for God. But the good news we have to share is that the search is over. God has come to us in the person of his Son.

And in Jesus we discover that God loves us – indeed he loved us so much that he sent his own Son to die to deal with that sin that threatens to destroy our very existence.

Eternal life is knowing God – and knowing his Son.

## **2. JESUS PRAYED FOR HIMSELF**

But I digress. Jesus, as he faced up to the prospect of imminent death, prayed to God. And in the first place he prayed that he might remain true to his calling right to the very end.

“**The hour has come**” – well, almost. By nine o’clock on the morning he will have been nailed to the cross. “**Give glory to your Son**” (v1). Jesus is not seeking glory for glory’s sake. Rather

he is praying that as he goes through the torture of the next few hours he will not let God down. **“Give glory to your Son, so that the Son may give glory to you”** (v1).

Jesus goes on: **“I have shown your glory on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do”** (v4). Yes, his mission is almost over.

There is no more teaching to do, no more healings to perform – all that is left is a cross to mount. Then, and only then, will he be able to say **“It is finished”** (19.30) – well and truly finished.

Strangely in all my 40 years as a Baptist minister I have never preached on this passage before. But as I do so today, I guess that I identify myself more with Jesus today than I would have if I had preached on this passage when I was a young man.

I now have many years less ahead of me than I have behind me.

And with Jesus I feel like saying, *‘Father, don’t let me let you down at this stage. Let my final years of ministry continue to give glory to you’*.

Indeed, it seems to me that there is a special word to all those of you here in this congregation who have a seniors rail card. Don’t get complacent. Rather, get on your knees and pray that even in your later years you will give glory to God. And not least that in your final hours, as you lie there in a hospital bed, there will be no words of complaint, but only words that give glory to God.

But of course, there is a word here too for us all, and not just for seniors.

It is OK for us to pray for ourselves. Indeed, we need to pray for ourselves.

But note what the thrust of our prayers should be: glory, the ability to give glory to God.

The Bible says nothing about praying for bigger houses, faster cars, better holidays – that’s the so-called prosperity Gospel, and the prosperity Gospel has nothing to do with the Gospel Jesus proclaimed.

All of us need to pray that in our lives we will remain true to Jesus – that we finish the work that God has given each one of us to do.

In preparing this sermon I came across the prayer of Sir Walter Raleigh: *“O Lord God, when you give your servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same to the end, until it be thoroughly finished, which yields the true glory; through him who for the finishing of your work, laid down his life, our redeemer, Jesus Christ”*

### **3. JESUS PRAYED FOR HIS DISCIPLES**

**“I pray for them”** and by **“them”** he means his disciples, those whom he has taught.

V8: **“I gave them the message that you gave me, and they received it; they know that it is true that I came from you, and they believe that you sent me”**.

What did he pray for his disciples? Three things.

## *1) He prayed for protection.*

**“Keep them safe”** (v11)

For three long years he has given of himself to them – and now that he is leaving them, he is fearful for them. I can understand Jesus’ concern for his disciples.

Indeed, I guess that anybody who has older children can understand. We have done our best for our kids, we have looked after them, protected them, but the time comes when they have to stand on their own two feet, and we say, ‘Father God, keep them safe’.

But note the safety which Jesus had in mind: v15 **“I do ask you to keep them safe from the Evil One”**. Jesus is speaking of spiritual safety – keep them safe from the wiles of the Evil One. With great sadness Jesus acknowledges that he has lost Judas (v12) – but he prays that the others may not be lost.

I wonder, how seriously do we acknowledge the fact that we are in a spiritual battle, where the Devil is doing his darndest to derail us? It is so easy for us to be complacent.

Peter was so confident that he would remain true to his Lord, and yet in the end he denied him three times. No wonder in his first letter he wrote: **“Be alert, be on the watch! Your enemy, the Devil round you like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour”** (1 Peter 5.8).

**“Keep them safe by the power of your name”**. Praise God that there is power in the name of Jesus – and that however much we may fail, we may find forgiveness, we may begin.

But there is no room for complacency. **“Keep them safe”**

## *2) He prayed for unity*

In v11 he prayed that **“they may be one just as you and I are one”**.

Significantly this prayer for unity is linked with the prayer for protection. For the longer version of this prayer for unity is: **“Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one”**.

The Devil likes nothing better than disrupting Christian fellowship.

It has been estimated that at any given time, three-quarters of Christian churches are bedevilled by conflict of one kind or another – and that in one quarter of churches the conflict is so severe that no meaningful mission or ministry can take place.

It has been said that where two or three Christians are gathered together in the name of Jesus, there is bound to be conflict from time to time.

Father, **“may they be one just as you and I are one”**

How I thank God for the unity that we enjoy as a church.

It is amazing that in spite of differences of age and gender, race and politics, we are one in Christ Jesus. But let’s not take our unity for granted. We need to heed the words of Paul: **“Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives”** (Eph 4.3)

### 3) *He prayed for joy.*

In v13 Jesus prays that his disciples “**might have my joy in their hearts in all its fullness**”. Christians have often be portrayed as ‘kill joys’. I think it was Thomas Swinburne who spoke of the world having become ‘gray’ thanks to Jesus. But the reverse is true. Christians are rainbow people. Jesus said: “**I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness**” (John 10.10), which is reminiscent of his prayer her – that they “**might have my joy in their hearts in all its fullness**”.

But do notice that the joy of which Jesus speaks is not the joy which comes from having a glass of bubbly in one hand and a pretty girl in another.

It is the joy which comes from knowing God as our Father and that in him our lives are secure, whatever.

Think of the context. Jesus knows that within a matter of hours he will be undergoing the most appalling suffering possible – and yet he speaks of joy.

The joy Jesus has in mind “*is not a superficial happiness that comes and goes with the circumstances, but a deep joy that persists and shapes character regardless of the situation*” (Tidball). It is the joy that Jesus knew – a joy which arises from knowing God.

To quote from 1 Peter again: in spite of suffering, “**you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose of your faith**” (1 Peter 1.8,9).

## 4. JESUS PRAYED FOR US

Amazingly Jesus prays for us.

Look at v20: “**I pray not only for them, but also for those in believe in me because of their message**” – yes, I believe that Jesus prayed for Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, amongst others of course!

“**I pray that they may all be one, Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you**” (v21). Yes, here again we are on the unity theme.

This verse has been the basis for the so-called ecumenical movement, the movement which brings churches of differing traditions together.

But do notice, Jesus is not interested in unity for unity’s sake.

For Jesus goes on: “**May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me**”.

We get so used to the fact that there are Baptist churches and Methodist churches, Catholic churches and Anglican churches – let alone the many totally independent churches like Oasis and the Christian Grown Centre – that we fail to see that our disunity is a stumbling block to the Gospel.

General Mobutu, who used to be the President of Congo, was one of the most corrupt characters imaginable. Certainly, thanks to the American aid which he siphoned off for himself, he was one of the richest people in Africa. And yet in spite of his many failings, he did one good thing. He united the Protestant Church in Congo. He did this by telling the Protestant churches that overnight they had to become one – and one they became. Every church immediately had a new notice-board outside their church: “The church of Christ in Congo”, and then in brackets ‘Baptist community’, ‘Methodist community’, or whatever. I have no desire to be an Anglican. And yet how I wish that we could all have the same notice-board: “The Church of England” – ‘Anglican community’, Baptist community etc.

Thank God relationships between the churches in Chelmsford are good. But let us remember that unity is for the sake of mission. **“May they be one, so that the world will believe that you have sent me”**.

We have had two superb Christian festivals here in Chelmsford – I am sad that there is no real desire for a third such festival. For when churches came together in mission, the wider community began to sit up.

But let’s localise the prayer of Jesus, in the sense of applying his prayer to our local church. If the world is to believe, then we need to be one – to be as close to one another as Jesus and his Father are close to one another. Yes, that is the kind of unity that Jesus is after.

As Baptists we believe in preaching – so much so that we allocate a large chunk of our service to preaching. But I believe that the unity of the church is far more important than the preaching of the church. For if there is no love for one another, then – in the words of the Apostle Paul we preachers are but” **noisy gongs or clanging bells**” (1 Cor 13.1). It is only where there is deep love for one another, only where there is true unity, that the Gospel can be preached effectively.

In summary, Jesus prayed. In many ways it is a model prayer for us, on how we should pray for ourselves and for others. It is not an easy prayer to pray – for it makes demands not just of God, but of ourselves.

Let’s spend a few minutes reflecting in silence on this prayer, before I lead you in a prayer.

*Holy and righteous Father, help us to live in love and in unity; so that the world may believe and that glory may be brought to your name. Amen.*