

John 17:11-19

Today's gospel reading begs us to consider one of the church's greatest mysteries: the mystery of the church's survival. For over two thousand years the church has survived empires, kingdoms and even supposed democracies that have tried to outlaw her tyrants and dictators who have persecuted her and policies and laws designed and written and to disrupt and discourage her. The Church has survived heretics, and some of history's **MOST** immoral leaders, Synodical splits, and of course dramatic and bloody reformations. She has suffered some of the grossest mismanagement of any organisation in recorded history. And I'm hardly even being cynical here. Any other human organisation would have long since gone under and vanished, but the Church goes on.

Even Josef Stalin, the Communist dictator who famously attempted to eradicate the Christian Church in Russia, eventually threw up his hands in desperation and is reported to have said, "You can't get rid of the Church. It's like a nail. The harder you drive it, the deeper it goes." Perhaps even more surprising, is that while science, history, literature, technology, and medicine all seem to be changing and advancing almost by the minute the historic Christian faith, has for whatever reason persevered.

So, what is the secret to the Church's longevity? What has sustained the church in spite of every attempt made by this world to wipe her off the face of the earth? What's the secret? How does a small rag tag group of some one hundred and twenty men and women gathered in a room on the eve of Pentecost in 29AD suddenly and inexplicably grow into a Church that quite literally embraces the globe and runs across every national and ethnic boundary? And how does a Church whose first official act was to cast lots to see who would succeed **A TRAITOR** in its midst become in the matter of some thirty years or so a movement that embraced the entire Roman world and dotted the Mediterranean with congregations who proclaimed Christ crucified and resurrected?

What's more, what was the secret of the Church in its infancy? It had no programs no publishing houses no buildings no financial security no endowments no schools. It had no bureaucracy no synod office buildings no Bishop Andrew, no Rev'd Sue!

One hundred and twenty people!!!! That was it! That was **THE ENTIRE** holy, catholic and apostolic Church on earth at that time. **ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY PEOPLE!** Who or what protected them??? What propelled them into the world???? What energised them??? What fired their momentum?? What possible hope could they have in a world already chock full of so many different religions? In a time and culture that was utterly hostile to their message, in a time when even speaking of Christ in public could mean certain death? How did the Church manage to survive all these years intact? One thing! One thing only!! And it is revealed in the first verse of our gospel reading for today: Jesus prayed **AND IS** praying for His Church.

And that same Jesus who hung on a Roman cross, rose from the dead and ascended into glory at the right hand of His Father, prays **PARTICULARLY** for His universal Church and **ESPECIALLY** for His church here in Mount Maunganui. Two thousand years ago when facing His imminent torturous death, Jesus stopped took a minute and prayed for us here today in the Mount. At a time when any other man could be forgiven for being preoccupied with their impending execution, Jesus instead chose to intercede for his church here in Mount Maunganui.

The seventeenth chapter of John gives us what many biblical scholars have referred to as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer", or what some other scholars sometimes call the "True Lord's Prayer," - it is a prayer that **only** Jesus can pray as this world's Great High Priest. In today's passage from that chapter, we find Christ in an intimate and vulnerable moment. He is at prayer. And we find Him praying specifically for His Church. He prays for all of us - his disciples and followers around the

world in every time and place. And I believe that it is **these** prayers which have upheld, sustained and protected the church.

And I also believe that it is also these prayers which have upheld, sustained, and protected the Anglican Church in Mount Maunganui and - as hard as it might be for us to believe right now - they will continue to do so into our future here. Christ's Church lives and it moves, and it has her very being under the umbrella of this singular prayer of Christ.

So, what specifically does Jesus pray for in this His Church? That she be successful? Popular? Powerful? Wealthy? Happy and clappy? That she worship at St. Mary's? That she worship at St. Peter's? Of course not! We read in today's gospel that Jesus prays for three things in particular:

- 1) that His Church be one (as Christ and the Father are one)
- 2) that she be protected
- 3) and that she be holy, sanctified, set apart to be a beacon of salvation to the world

Let's unpack these a little more

FIRSTLY - Jesus' prayer is that we, the church - be one, just as He and the Father are one. Jesus is praying for the unity of His Church. Jesus is praying for the unity of Mount Maunganui. My brothers and sisters, let the profundity of that sink in for a moment. More than two thousand years ago before we came to him, he came to us and prayed for unity in our church right now right here today in the Mount.

Wow!

To some of you, this might challenge your thinking. It may even sound a bit far-fetched today, especially when we consider the 20,000 or so Christian denominations covering the planet - each one claiming a monopoly in the truth. And cynically, we might even wonder what has happened to this prayer of Jesus over the last two thousand years. What began as a fairly - though not entirely - unified movement that swept across the Mediterranean world, is today a movement so fragmented and so tribal that the very idea of unity is almost a joke

Did someone say joke? Here we go!

There were two men who found themselves seated beside one another on a flight. One looks to the other and says, "Are you a believer or an atheist?" "Believer," the other man replies. "Me too," the first man says. "Are you a Christian or Jew," the man asks. "Christian," the other man replies. "Me too." "Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant," the man says. "Me too." "Lutheran or Anglican." "Anglican," the man said. "Me, too." "High church or low church?" "High church," the man replied. "Me, too." "1549 Book of Common Prayer or 1662 Book of Common Prayer?" "1662 the other replies.

And the first man jumped out of his seat and said, "1662!!!! I'd rather burn in hell than sit next to heretical scum!"

So, Mount Maunganui, how are we doing? Are we as one right now? Are we one, as Christ and the Father are one? Are we fulfilling Christ's prayers for us in this place?

Sadly, sometimes, we need to concern ourselves with separatism - those things which create needless divisions within the Church. But whoever or whatever divides the church opposes the church's great High Priest and it opposes **his** prayer that the Church be unified. We need to be

abundantly cautious that we don't create divisions where there aren't any. Or that we don't create divisions of differences that result simply from different points of view or from different perspectives.

There is **ONE** Lord, **ONE** faith, **ONE** Baptism, **ONE** God and Father of us all. There is only **ONE** Bread and **ONE** Cup. This is all that **WILL EVER** matter, Mount Maunganui.

AND WHEREVER we experience Baptism, wherever we partake in the Lord's Supper, wherever we offer and receive forgiveness that is spoken in the name of the crucified and risen Lord, we have an infallible and inerrant sign that this prayer of Jesus we read about in today's gospel is a **LIVING** prayer that it is **HAVING ITS WAY** with us it is **WORKING THROUGH** us unifying us.

SECONDLY, Jesus prays that the Church be protected from the attacks and assaults of the devil. Jesus **KNEW** this enemy well. He had tangled with him in the wilderness. And He **KNEW** that the evil one would give His Church no rest. This might be when doubts begin to creep in. When the Church experiences unbelief, despair even. Christ knew what His Church would be up against, and so He prays for the Church's ongoing protection.

It is worth noting that Christ specifically prays that the Church not be taken out of the world. In fact, it's quite the opposite!!!! He sends them **OUT INTO** the world. **THAT'S** where all the action is!!!! He doesn't establish some isolated camp or ideal living community like Gloriavale. Even still, the Church has tried that route and still does. But how can isolationism ever be reconciled with *good news* that demands to be preached. The Church exists to **proclaim** the reign of Christ to proclaim His death and resurrection for the salvation of all life in this world. We could **NEVER** accomplish that in isolation. So, Mount Maunganui, how are we doing at facing our community that we are called to serve?

THIRDLY, Jesus prays that we be made holy, sanctified in the truth of God's word. The Church is to be unique, set apart, different maybe even a little weird!!!! The Bible calls this a "royal priesthood," a chosen people, a holy nation. Salt of **this** earth and light for **this** world. A "peculiar people" with a peculiar purpose – to proclaim the reign of Jesus' death and resurrection over all things. And, in order to do that work, we are to be sanctified, consecrated set apart for holy use. Christ has set His Church apart from all else in this world for the purpose of being a sacramental sign of salvation to all.

None of us can now see Jesus in His ascended glory. **BUT** the "body of Christ" (His Church) **becomes** visible whenever we - the baptised, the faithful - gather to hear the word of Christ and to receive His body and blood. Now, we are **ALL** become signs of salvation to those around us. God has made an example out of **us**. He baptised **us**. He set **us** apart to be a priest for Him in this world. To show and to teach others to live in the freedom of Jesus.

The Word that is truth sets us apart. Truth sets us apart! We know the awful truth of our sin. But more importantly, we also know the greater truth of salvation through Christ. And that particular gift of God's grace makes us peculiar, makes us different, makes us holy, sets us apart. And, perhaps most importantly, it puts us directly in the cross hairs of those prayers that Jesus prayed and is still praying.

Over two thousand years ago, Jesus prayed for his beautiful and beloved Anglicans of Mount Maunganui. And our High Priest prays for us still. The nature of that prayer for the Mount has never once changed over all that time. He prays that we would be united, that we be as one - just as He and the Father are one. He prays that we would be protected from evil as we face and go out into

the Mount community that we are called to serve. And He prays that we continue to be sanctified through the sacraments we celebrate here in the Mount, in His almighty name.

My brothers and sisters, please remember this when you doubt, remember this when you despair when you think there is no future for the Church when you think there is no future for the Church here in Mount Maunganui. When we feel like the Church's future and even her very existence are in danger threatened jeopardised and so, so helpless when it appears like we are out of touch with the world and that we are ill-equipped to face this moment

Remember who prays for the Church – Jesus – the greatest of all High Priests our loving Bridegroom. He prays for us constantly. And under the umbrella of the that prayer, we are sustained, and we can do amazing things here in this place.

Sermon delivered by Chaliun Poppy on Wednesday 4th June 2025