

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 17 May 2026

(Seventh Sunday of Easter – Sunday after Ascension)

The week of Prayer for Christian Unity

On Thursday we observed The Feast of the Ascension. It is often imagined as Jesus leaving the earth and ascending “up” into heaven. The observance is not about up there or down here or about confining God to space or time but as Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Canterbury says,

“At Ascension, we see that just as God transcends our understanding of time – past, present and future – so too God transcends our understanding of space – up and down, here and there. There is no division between heaven and earth. God is, was, and ever shall be here. God is, was, and ever shall be one of us: from the beginning of time to its end.”

This understanding is reflected in Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John we have just heard. Jesus speaks not of separation, but of glory, unity, and abiding presence: “All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them” (John 17:10). Even as Jesus prepares to leave his disciples physically, he assures them that they remain held within the life of God.

As a youngster growing up in the 1950's and 1960's sectarianism was alive and well here in Burnley. Illustrated by these ditties such as these recited by adults and children alike.

“Catholics, catholics, ring the bell, while the ‘protties’ go to hell.

Catholic doges sit on logs, eating chocolate out of frogs.

Salvation Army free from sin, all went to heaven in a kerosene tin.’

There were many more some not to be spoken in polite company such as this.

Catholics attended their own schools, marriage between Catholics and Protestants not encouraged, if not frowned upon. I recall relatives of mine, one of whom was not a Catholic having to be married in the vestry and having to agree and promise to raise their children as Catholics. Then of course the split in the ALP with the spin off DLP was in large a religious division. The majority of those who played AFL for Richmond were Catholics and the club chaplain, Fr. Flynn, from the local Catholic priest from St Ignatius.

While there are still elements of suspicion and distrust between and within Churches thankfully the extremes of Christian division have eased, although in some sections of the Church, on matters of sexuality, right to life, other religions, and the place of religion, there remains gulfs of opinion and belief. At the same time a once thriving ecumenical movement of the 70's and 80's, initiated in many ways by the Archbishops of Melbourne of the time, both the Catholic and Anglican, however, has declined to various degrees depending on local clergy and local influences as many of our churches have retreated into survival mission in an ever-increasing humanist and secular world. Others have raised to a new level, doctrine defined and relevant to a past age where knowledge was limited and often unknown. Likewise others have resorted to a literal understanding of scripture ignoring modern biblical scholarship. We do not have time to explore why this has occurred today other than to say we are not entirely blameless ourselves. Today's Gospel is difficult. It has long been the watchword for Christian unity, and it is at the heart of the message of John's Gospel. Unlike the other Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus prays before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane in John's Gospel Jesus' farewell discourse, as it is known takes place at the end of the Passover meal. Jesus has not travelled to Jerusalem as yet and has given and told to his disciples as much as possible as to

what will lay ahead. He has had his final conversation with the disciples in the upper room.

In today's Gospel we find Jesus praying and interceding on behalf of his disciples and for us all that we may be one together as he is one with the Father. The words spoken are part of the "The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus". Jesus is praying for reconciliation and restoration. He speaks about relationships as the centre piece of what it means to be truly human and created in the image of God. It is his last conversation with the disciples and followers.

The 4th Gospel of John arose after the most shocking and disorientating event for Israel for over 600 years- the destruction of the Temple-the house of Yahweh, by the Romans in 10CE. Following this event, and without the presence of the Temple, Judaism saw a revitalized commitment to the Torah, for the Law the other place where God may be found. The Johannine community found itself in terrible tension with this new Jewish establishment. The issue was not so much with "the man or woman in the street" as we say but with the political, economic, and religious leaders. The more John's community proclaimed Jesus, the more they were vilified as heretics and traitors.

In this prayer for unity, reconciliation, and restoration Jesus is not suggesting a certain managerial style or leadership hierarchy, uniformity or a bureaucratic or organizational review of management to restore relationships but something very different. Jesus is not suggesting some super church structure or telling us we all need to be of the one mind on every issue. Instead, our unity in Christ is to be based on a true understanding of love for God and one another. It is about harmonious, tolerant and loving relationships not bigotry or exclusion. It is on a much higher plain than doctrine, dogma, job descriptions and the like. A love that Paul describes as kind and patience, not jealous, conceited, or proud, is

not ill mannered or selfish or irritable. Love that exposes evil for what it is and instead seeks truth, does not keep score, and says sorry when necessary. A love of others that places service above privilege, wealth and status.

Jesus in today's Gospel expresses a deep and intimate relationship with the Father. It is this intimacy, this forgiving and faithful love between them that we are called to be like. It is the way of the cross and the promise and meaning of the resurrection. True unity is dependent on how we relate to one another as individuals and church. Jesus is not Roman Catholic or Anglican but catholic with a small c for all, as we claim in the Nicene Creed.

Disunity is not of course confined to the Churches. Look at the news daily to see how our world, God's creation is at war with itself, divided politically, economically and socially.

The challenge for us all is how do we remain respectful to those who hold differing views to us on matters of ethics, interpretation of scripture, ecclesiology and doctrine and remain members of the one household of Faith in differing forms? How do we converse with those who hold different views on matters of doctrine or ethics without believing they are wrong and evil for holding divergent beliefs? I suggest that it is in communion with one another, as expressed in the intimacy of the union between Jesus and his father that we meet in the Eucharistic meal, by the acts of hospitality offered to us in the bread and wine that we are called to be like. It is to recognize and fully understand the call to unity, whether it is within our family, in our parish, in this gathered community here, between the various Christian denominations can only be fully realized when we place our faith not in structures or personalities but in our relationship with God and each other. When we continue to love when our own feelings and opinions are ignored, neglected, or not heard, when we are prepared to let go, so that we might be liberated and set free.

This is all risky business but whoever said that Christian faith would be easy.

Today's readings from John and Acts offer us an important lesson on unity. God's unity is not coercive. Unity is born of an invitation to love one another in a radical, sacrificial way. Divine unity is not born of a focus on who belongs and who doesn't. The church is a place of disruptive love that challenges each one of us to think and act together for the glory of God and the benefit of all.

Amen