

## **24-1-2021 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

### **Readings:**

Revelation 19:6-10

John 15:1-17

### **Sermon**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps. 19:14) Amen.

There is a lot to be learned from today's Bible texts about who God is and about our relationship with God; how we are supposed to act towards God as well as towards one another. Especially the Gospel reading gives us real dynamite, but about that later; let's start with Revelation.

We hear as if it came from a large crowd that the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. And we are called to rejoice and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb. The relationship we have with God and Jesus is described here as a marriage and the Angel says: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb". Our relationship with God and Jesus is not described as slaves serving a master. It is described as Jesus being the groom and we, the Church being the bride. We see something similar in John's Gospel, where Jesus says: "I don't call you servants, I call you friends". Our relationship with God and Jesus is described as a marriage, a very close relationship; not servants who do not know what the master is up to, but a much closer relationship, a relationship of friends, or even a relationship of marriage, of love. Throughout Scripture the marriage metaphor depicts God's relationship with his people like no other; we see that in the prophesy of Hosea 2:16, 19-20 and in Isaiah, chapter 54:5-7 and Jeremiah 2:2; but also in the New Testament, in Matthew 25:1-13. The prophets often speak of Israel as the wife of the Lord. It is not uncommon. In several places even where Israel is unfaithful to God, it is described as the adultery of an unfaithful wife.

As I said the relationship of God with us is described as a very close relationship, a loving relationship. And this loving relationship is more closely stipulated in today's Gospel text. What love do we talk about? What kind of love does Jesus have in mind?

In today's Gospel text Jesus uses another metaphor before he comes to 'love' as his central point. He starts off with the metaphor of himself as the vine and his Father as the vine-grower. The vine-grower who removes every branch of the vine that bears no fruit and who prunes every branch that bears fruit to make sure it bears even more fruit. And those branches are we. Which means we are cut off if and when we don't bear fruit. And therefore Jesus calls upon us to stay with him: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." We have to stay close to Jesus, we have to follow him; without him our works are idle. Without Jesus we will wither and end up in the fire.

And John makes is very clear: if we stay with Jesus and become his disciples, our works are not idle. If we do so we will glorify God. And there comes the big move in this Gospel text: if we glorify God in becoming disciples of Christ, we will be loved by Jesus Christ as the Father loves him. "Abide in my love", Jesus says. And how do we do that? By keeping his commandments, as he kept the commandments of the Father.

And here comes the dynamite, in the verses 12 and 13: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And then Jesus calls his disciples his friends. And that means that he is prepared to lay down his life for his disciples. He is willing to lay down his life for us. But he expects the same from us. Our love for one another should have no limits.

Jesus makes it clear: I told you everything I know from the Father; I have chosen you as my disciples, my friends, because I know that in this love, you can bear fruit, fruit that will last. Jesus tells us here that he is sending us out into the world, well equipped, to bring the Gospel of love to everyone in the whole wide world.

And then comes the dynamite again in verse 17: "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." But be convinced we are talking here about love without conditions; love for our friends, but also for our enemies. Love like the Father loves his Son and like the Father and the Son are loving us.

This is the most beautiful command Jesus could ever give us; it is also the most difficult command possible. Unconditional love. Loving one another like Jesus loves us.

In this weekend ends the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Every year for a week in January we pray for Christian Unity. We do that for over a hundred years already.

What on earth are we doing? Or should I say: what on earth have we done in the past that makes it necessary to pray for unity? Well, I can tell you, over the centuries we have messed up the Church big time.

The Church started as a group of believers, followers of Christ Jesus; he instructed us to be his church, his body. And all the members of that body had their own specific role to play to form the body together. One cannot do without the other, we are one body. That was the ideal situation. But already in the first century we hear from the apostle Paul that there is discord among the members. For example in the community in Corinth there are different factions; they quarrel among one another. In the first chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians we hear Paul say that people split up the congregation by saying 'I belong to Paul' and 'I belong to Apollos' and 'I belong to Cephas' or 'I belong to Christ'. And Paul asks them: 'Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?' Paul reprimands them and tells them to come together, to stop following human wisdom and start following God's wisdom.

So already in the first century there has been division in the Church. And it seems it only gets worse over the centuries. In the third and fourth century, when the Church gets more established, they need several big Councils to describe what Christian faith is all about. And large groups disagree and form their own churches. Later large schisms take place: in 1054 the churches of east and west split up and create the Church of Rome in the west and the Orthodox Church of Constantinople

in the east; in the sixteenth century the western Church again falls apart and the different protestant churches come into being. There are about 41,000 different denominations and organisations in the world today. And over the centuries a number of these denominations have fought wars among one another.

Back to where we started: one Christ, one Body, one Church.

Sometimes people ask the question: Why does it take so long for Jesus to come back and complete the Kingdom of God.

It's my honest opinion that the divided church that we have is one of the main reasons for that. If we are not able to bring the Church together in one Body, we are not worthy to live in God's Kingdom.

There lies an enormous task for us: to bring these 41,000 denominations closer together. For that reason the Week of Prayer is so important.

I can tell you I feel very proud of our Diocese and our Bishops very much being involved in ecumenical efforts all over Europe. And yes, I am very proud of our own congregation where more than twenty denominations live together as one Church, one Body of Christ. Let us be as inclusive as we can be. And especially as soon we are putting together a Profile of our Congregation: let us make room for Christians and non-Christians of whatever denomination.

Let the commandment of the Lord of unconditional love be our first and most important and basic assumption: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Unity in Christ, one Body, one Church.

Heavenly Father, we pray for unity, one Body, one Church, working towards the spread of your Kingdom worldwide, now and forever. Amen.