

William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury for a brief period from 1942 until his sudden death in 1944, made a profound impact on the Church of the 20th century. Himself the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, he became a keen advocate of social reform and a just society incurring the wrath of politicians of the day; and was also a key figure in the early days of the ecumenical movement, being a founder member of the British Council of Churches.

He had a vision of Church that looked out beyond itself to the world it was called to serve. He said on one occasion, ‘The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.’

These words came to my mind as I reflected on our Gospel reading for today (*John 17:20-26*) The passage is set in the Upper Room as Jesus prays for his disciples on the night before he died. But the focus is not solely on that close knit group but on the world outside, on those, who in the future, will come to believe through their witness.

²⁰I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one.

John 17;20-21

The focus is already on the Church that is yet to be, that community, and later those communities, that will evolve through the witness of these first disciples.

The lesson that I take from that is that the Parish of Howth of tomorrow has its beginnings in the Parish of Howth that is here today. So, when I say. ‘Look around and add 10 years to everyone’s age’, what I am really emphasising is that the Church of tomorrow begins with us. Just as the Church of today began with the Church that was here 50, 100 years ago.

Why is Jesus praying for this close knit group, why is he praying for those who will come to believe through their witness? John, in his account of this prayer of Jesus, puts it quite simply:

so that the world may believe that you have sent me. *John 17:21*

This is not simply a community of like minded individuals, this is a community with a purpose. You may recall that at the Easter General Vestry I recalled the very thorough process followed in the lead up to the Roof Project, in which we identified the extent of our problem, identified the resources we had to meet that problem and the steps we needed to take to make up the shortfall. I went on to suggest that we needed a similar thoroughness in our thoughts on how we tackle the future of the worshipping community in this place. We know the problem – our numbers are falling. I then asked, what are the resources we bring to this problem. The first and principal resource we bring is our faith, our conviction that God has a purpose for this place that goes beyond ourselves.

At different points in our Gospel reading, Jesus prays ‘that they may be one’. It is part of human nature to form associations with those of like mind and there is nothing inherently wrong in that. The problems arise when these associations become divisive. We see examples of this in the very early days of the Church. Paul, as he embarks upon his first letter to the Corinthians, addresses this very issue:

For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” (*1 Cor 1:11,12*)

Paul makes a passionate appeal for unity, that these divisions may be set aside, lest the centrality of the Gospel be forgotten and the mission of the Church in Corinth be undermined.

We had a lovely outworking last weekend of unity of purpose in our Parish Fete. While there was a very healthy competition between the various stall holders and a sense of pride in the amount their particular stall made, there was a wonderful sense of a unity of purpose. That was lovely for the community of the Parish, there weren't any major rows, people went home feeling satisfied on the day. There was more to it than that – it was lovely to hear in the days that followed from people who were part of the wider community, or even complete outsiders, who remarked on the lovely atmosphere, the sense of unity of purpose. And that said something special about this place.

As Jesus' prayer draws to a close, he returns to this importance of unity; unity not for its own sake, not even for the sake of the disciples but for the sake of the world beyond the doors of that Upper Room.

²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:22,23

That they may be one, That they may be completely one That the world may know that you sent me and have loved them.

As I said at Easter Vestry, we are at a crucial stage in the life of this Parish as we seek to continue the witness of this place in a rapidly changing and evolving society. I have spoken about an ongoing conversation – we will bring different ideas, different perspectives to this process. But let us do so with a unity of purpose as we seek to discern what is God's purposes for us as Parish in this place and time in which God has placed us, as we remind ourselves of those prophetic words of William Temple; 'The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.' – so that the world may know who we are and whom we serve.