2 June 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 16:16–34; Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–end; John 17:20–end
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Some of you may be wondering what the CF in the service sheet after my name stands for; is it that, as it has in the past been suggested, I am a member of some obscure Franciscan Order? Nothing so glamorous. It stands for Chaplain to the Forces, an army padre. I first joined the army a long time back, back in 1988. As it was then, so it is now: the army loves acronyms. And one of the first acronyms we were taught was KISS: keep it simple, stupid. The stupid bit is a forceful reminder to whoever was coming up with a plan or giving the orders that, to paraphrase the Prussian Field Marshall von Moltke, if few plans survive contact with the enemy, the more complex the plan or the orders setting out the plan, the less likely they will survive. But the KISS principle also recognises the state of mind of those giving and receiving the orders, particularly amidst the fear, anxiety and chaos of war. The truth is that when the rubber hits the road, things become extremely simple and the focus of soldiers narrows to only what it is before them. When passions are high, simplicity is of the essence.

Clearly, John wasn’t taught the KISS principle. Instantly recognisable as being the very distinctive voice of John’s gospel, if there is one thing indisputable about what is known as the High Priestly Prayer, this morning’s Gospel reading, is its theological complexity. It may take only 4 or 5 minutes to read, but while I come away with the feeling that I know more or less what Jesus is saying, I am never completely sure that I have fully understood him. The language is purposefully intricate as it attempts to reflect the mystery and majesty of the God who took on human form.

The priestly prayer is itself the sublime conclusion to the Farewell Discourse, four long chapters of John’s Gospel which cover the period from Jesus joining his disciples in the Upper Room the night before his crucifixion to the moment he leaves to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, where of course he would be betrayed into the hands of the religious authorities. Much has gone on. He has bent down to wash his disciples’ feet; admonished Peter’s brash faith by predicting that Peter will deny him three times; dipped
bread into his dish and then presented it to Judas, perhaps a prefiguring of the Eucharist, who had then rushed off into the night to betray him. He had warned them of his impending death as well as their future suffering at the hands of a world that hated them. He had promised to love them always and he reassured them that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide them. He had told them that they were to love each other as he had loved them. Then, in their hearing, still at table, Jesus turns from addressing them and prays to the Father.

We would be forgiven if we imagined that the disciples were somewhat in a state of shock. They had after all followed Jesus triumphantly into Jerusalem barely a few days previously. It now seemed that Jesus was telling them that things were soon to turn to ashes. They had already lost one of the apostles and another, the rock on whom the future church was to be built, would soon act not so rock like. And yet here was Jesus talking to them of his glory, the glory, as you will remember from the prologue of John, “the Word became flesh and lived among, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth”. This glory, the glory of God becoming human and dwelling with us, Jesus tells his disciples, on the very precipice of Good Friday, he has given to his disciples and to all those who will believe in him through their word. That is, us here this morning. We have all been given this extraordinary glory which brings both an indwelling of God in us, but also complete union with God. And layered onto this glory and union, the fruits of it, comes the knowledge and the love of God.

The prospect of this union, this complete oneness, this becoming one is, I think, extraordinarily difficult to grasp: let alone truly appreciate and live out. The early fathers spoke of our divination. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote that Jesus was made man that we might be made God. Even if not understood as overcoming the metaphysical distinction between flesh and divinity, we are invited at the very least to be “partakers of the divine nature” and to be raised to be with Jesus at the Father’s right hand. How many of us here this morning truly believe that we are in a real sense God-like, and as such are truly willing to risk all in loving each other as God loves us. How many of us here this morning truly believe that we are God-like, and as such, are seeking truly a complete union with each other, so that each truly becomes each other’s brother and sister.

And what of the apostles and disciples in that upper room? Did they really hear and understand that Jesus as the Son was bestowing on them the dignity and majesty of also becoming sons and daughters of God the Father? Or were their minds racing with the “what ifs” that next day promised? More probable. But I also believe that what they
would have heard was the sheer poetry of Jesus’ prayer, the constant repetition of “I” and “you” and “them” and “us” and “being one” and “glory” and above all “love”. They may not have heard or understood the theological depths of Jesus’ prayer in the very moment of hearing, but they would have understood the love that Jesus was expressing for them, the grace and the blessing being bestowed on them in Jesus’ prayer to his Father: to their Father.

They may not have fully understood but the seeds of that prayer were undoubtedly planted in their minds, souls and bodies and allowed them to endure the immediate days that were to follow and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to grow in their understanding. And equally I believe that as Jesus prayed in communion with his disciples, he also received their love, however distracted, and their blessing in return, and maybe, just maybe, that extra strength to drink the cup that his Father has given him.

When we stretch our hands to receive the bread of life this morning, my hope is that in the mystical union that binds us all as one in Christ we truly hear Jesus’ prayer in our hearts and we offer our own prayer of love to Christ; so that the reality of becoming completely one is made manifest in all of our lives. Amen.