

20210516 - John 17:67-19

Holy Father protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. John 17:11b.

During World War II, General Eisenhower was paying a visit to front-line troops. The general's visit was an attempt to lift their sagging spirits.

The day itself was wet and the mud was ankle deep.

The command officer of the regiment led the general to a makeshift wooden platform.

There he delivered a talk, telling the soldiers what a fine job they were doing. The men listened respectfully but seemed just as downcast as before.

Sensing this, Eisenhower cut the speech short, walked to the steps at the edge of the platform and started to descend.

Part way down he slipped on the muddy steps and landed flat on his face in a large mud hole.

Immediately, the GI's came to life, roaring with uncontrolled glee.

The CO, angry with his men for their behaviour, apologised profusely.

"It's all right," the general smiled, wiping the mud from his face.

"that fall did more for their morale than any speech I could have given!"

It's easy to understand why the general's fall raised the spirits of the soldiers. Whilst he was standing on the platform it was difficult to avoid speaking down to them; but when he got mud on his face he was at one with them.

In today's Gospel we hear what many would consider to be some of the lofty thoughts from Jesus: prayers for unity; for the fullness of joy among all people; for truth.

These are the kind of "up-in-the-air" prayers that we think up on our "fairy tale" days when we hope to "live happily ever after".

And we certainly don't really expect them to be answered.

Jesus offers these prayers at the Last Supper with his disciples.

And if, within 24 hours, he had then ascended back to his Father we might well

be justified in thinking that Jesus didn't really mean what he was saying. "He was just trying to lift the troops," we would say.

The fact is, however, that the next day Jesus was not back with his Father in heaven.

He was on the cross, suffering a most terrible death.

In the language used by the servicemen, he ended up with mud on his face.

He was one of us.

This makes all the difference as we listen to Jesus' prayer on the night before he died.

We realise that he means it to the extent of being prepared to die for it.

But is it a prayer that Jesus can really hope to have answered?

The answer is obvious to anyone who knows Jesus.

His offering of prayer was the same action as the offering of his body on the cross.

When his heavenly Father accepted Jesus in the offering of his body, then, he accepted everything that Jesus prayed for.

The ascent of Jesus into heaven was a sign that prayer - the union of God and humanity - had reached perfection in Jesus.

All that Jesus carried in his prayer was accepted into heaven also.

As Christians we have been taken into the prayer of Jesus.

He prayed that we may be one as he and the Father are one. He prayed for our glory.

Nothing can ever prevent these prayers from being answered.

We can look forward to perfect unity, to the fullness of joy, to the triumph of truth.

And it is possible to believe all this because Jesus came down to our level and emptied himself in order to raise our spirits and make us one in his triumphal entry into heaven.

As we listen to the prayer of Jesus we may be tempted to extremes.

The first is to say that the prayer of Christ is so powerful; that there is no need for us to contribute to its achievement, for with Christ behind it,

unity and truth will happen one day anyway; and so we sit back and do nothing. The second is to be so frightened by the full burdens of humankind's problems and to be so weighed down by the immensity of the task that, again, we sit back and attempt nothing.

Both reactions, of course, are to misunderstand Christ's prayer. Christ had such respect for us that he became one of us. And he continues that respect for us by recognising that he can only achieve his objectives through us. By choosing us to share in his work and prayer he makes each one of us important. And each action - even the smallest act of compassion is important.

Do we respect what Christ has done for us?
If not, why not?
Do you need help to understand this?

Amen.