

Sermon (#11)

Sunday 12th May 2019

Gospel Reading: John 10:22-30.

Word Count: 1422 words

Title: **Reach Out, Touch, and Begin to Know**

May all I say and all we think be in harmony with you, God within, God beyond, God of all wisdom.

Amen.

Please be seated...

In today's reading from John's gospel we hear Jesus say, 'the Father and I are one'...

We often use language without thinking about it. In church we sometimes use words and phrases, or read familiar passages of scripture, without a second thought. We might assume we know what they mean but there are often different interpretations that can be made. So, when Jesus said 'the Father and I are one', it begs the question...what did he mean? Well, there are a number of different ways of understanding this statement and I'd like to briefly consider four of them today.

Firstly, let's start with the assumption that I think the Jews gathered around Jesus made...that Jesus was declaring himself divine, and what's more, declaring himself one with God in a way that no one else is. A few short verses later this is confirmed when we hear the Jews saying 'it is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God'¹. In the Jewish tradition God is the creator God and human beings are creatures of God. So, Judaism teaches that it is heretical for a person, a human being, to claim to be God, or even the son of God. Furthermore, notions of duality or trinity in relation to God are also considered heretical in the Jewish tradition and this is decisively expressed in the Book of Deuteronomy, where we find the famous affirmation 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'². So, when Jesus claimed that 'the Father and I are one', and it was understood in this way, it was blasphemous in the extreme and its little wonder that it drew such a fierce reaction from the Jewish leaders.

A second way that this affirmation can be understood is as a statement of Christian unity, a unity centred in love and described by Jesus later in John's gospel where he prays to the Father that his followers 'may be one, as we are one'³. As William Barclay says in his commentary on The Gospel of John, 'Jesus is one with God because of his love of God' and 'Christians are one with each other when they are bound by love'⁴. So, in this sense, Jesus' claim that 'the Father and I are one' is a relational statement; he and the Father are one in love, in purpose, and in their

¹ John 10:33 (NRSV)

² Deuteronomy 6:4 (ESV)

³ John 17:11 (NRSV)

⁴ Barclay, W (2001) *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Volume 2*. Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, p. 87.

aspirations. His unitive relationship with God through love is to be mirrored in our relationships with each other as we give of ourselves in love. It is through love that we may be 'one', one with God and one with each other. But, this loving relational unity calls us away from a passive, observational faith, to a faith that is engaged and participatory. It is in this relationship of love, with God and each other, that we are called to actively become co-creators of God's kingdom here and now.

For a third understanding, I'm going to concentrate on a tradition that upholds oneness with the divine as our essential truth. This tradition teaches that our innermost soul is also the ultimate reality that pervades the universe; our true reality, our true inner self, is one with ultimate divine reality and our present experience of separateness is an illusion. So, in this understanding there is, at the deepest level of ourselves, what the American Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault refers to as, 'an equivalency of being'⁵; meaning that we are, in reality, a manifestation of the 'all-pervading God'⁶. Understood in this sense, Jesus experienced this 'equivalency of being' and declared that 'the Father' (the ground of the universe, the all-pervading God) 'and I' (the ground of my human consciousness, my true self), 'are one'. But, in this interpretation, Jesus does not mean I am divine in a unique and exclusive way. In this understanding, Jesus was revealing a reality that exists for all of us.

Our fourth understanding is similar, in that it still maintains that we are not separate from God, but it shifts us away from the notion of oneness, or equivalency of being.

⁵ Bourgeault, C (2008) *The Wisdom Jesus*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, p. 31

⁶ Sen, K. M. (1961) *Hinduism*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., p.8-9.

For this understanding we turn again to Cynthia Bourgeault who uses the terms 'mutual indwelling' and 'mutual interabiding'⁷ to describe the experience that Jesus was expressing. In this sense, Jesus awoke to, consented to, and lived within this 'mutual interabiding' with God. He meant it to be understood as 'a complete mutual indwelling' as if he were saying 'I am in God, God is in you, you are in God, we are in each other'⁸. With this awareness Jesus was able to say 'I am the vine, you are the branches'⁹, 'abide in me as I abide in you'¹⁰. As Bourgeault puts it 'the vine gives life and coherence to the branch while the branch makes visible what the vine is'¹¹. Later in John's gospel, Jesus prays for the twelve and all his future disciples 'that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me...'¹². His yearning was for us to know what he had known, for us to be 'partakers of the divine nature'¹³, for us to share and live within this 'mutual indwelling', this flow where 'we flow into God and God into us'¹⁴.

So, what does all of this mean? Which interpretation is right? Well, although I have my own thoughts, it's not my place to tell you what to think. As the Rhineland mystic Hildegard of Bingen said 'we cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not home' she said, we have to 'take back our own listening, use our own voice, see our own light'¹⁵. You have to

⁷ Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p. 31

⁸ Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p. 31

⁹ John 15:5

¹⁰ John 15:4

¹¹ Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p. 31

¹² John 17:22 (NRSV)

¹³ 2 Peter 1:4 (RSV)

¹⁴ Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p. 31

¹⁵ Hildegard von Bingen. Accessed from: <http://russellmcneil.blogspot.com/2007/08/hildegard-von-bingen-1098-1179.html> Accessed on: 10.05.19.

come to your own conclusions. Perhaps it's enough for me to finish with a story, a story about a doll of salt...

'A doll of salt, after a long pilgrimage on dry land, came to the sea and discovered something she had never seen and could not possibly understand. She stood on the firm ground, a solid little doll of salt, and saw there was another ground that was mobile, insecure, noisy, strange and unknown. She asked the sea, "But what are you?" and it said, "I am the sea." And the doll said, "What is the sea?" to which the answer was, "It is me." Then the doll said, "I cannot understand, but I want to; how can I?" The sea answered, "Touch me." So the doll shyly put forward a foot and touched the water and she got a strange impression that it was something that began to be knowable. She withdrew her leg, looked and saw that her toe had gone, and she was afraid and said, "Oh, but where is my toe, what have you done to me?" And the sea said, "You have given something in order to understand." Gradually the water took away small bits of the doll's salt and the doll went farther and farther into the sea and at every moment she had a sense of understanding more and more, and yet of not being able to say what the sea was. As she went deeper, she melted more and more, repeating: "But what is the sea?" At last a wave dissolved the rest of her and the doll said: "It is I".'¹⁶

The salt doll realised its true relationship with the sea, and Jesus awoke to his true relationship with God. Like the salt doll, when we approach God we cannot possibly

¹⁶ Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (1999) *Living Prayer*. London: Darton Longman and Todd, p. 137-138.

understand. All we can do is reach out, touch, and begin to know; to know the flow of God into us and us into God.

Amen.