

‘This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God...’ (John 17.3)

Last Thursday was Ascension Day – and today’s first reading was on ascension (on the physical departure of Christ from earth into the presence of God in Heaven). A sermon from the Archbishop on ascension is already made available to you through our page. So, let me not take up that topic.

And today’s gospel ends with the words: ‘that they may be one, as we are one’ – and we meditated on this theme ‘unity’ last Sunday. So let me pick another verse from today’s gospel for our meditation today... verse three. Jesus says, ‘this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’

This chapter, chapter 17 is the longest recorded prayer of our Lord – It is called the ‘high priestly prayer’. Jesus prayed this probably in the ‘upper room’ before the group moved to the Garden of Gethsemane. It appears that John overheard Jesus praying - and recorded it. In this prayer Jesus was having his last earnest conversation with God.

Here, Jesus addresses God with the word ‘Father’ (Father, the hour has come). Seeing Jesus using the word ‘father’ let us not mistake that God is male. God who is spirit cannot be male or female nor both male and female – God is beyond all name and form (in relation with God - language is trying to express something beyond its limits). So this word ‘Father’ primarily indicates that God is personal – and, when Jesus calls God ‘Father’ – it expresses the intimacy, yet distinction, between the first and second persons of the Trinity.

Now lets us look into this prayer. First things that I noticed here is ... Jesus is not praying for himself (it is not a laundry list) – there is no hint of self-interest – but he prays for his disciples. And most importantly, in this prayer Jesus defines eternal life.

We know that eternal life is not living for ever. No one ceases to exist when they die. So eternal life is not living for ever.

Jesus says, ‘this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ’. This is a striking definition – because Jesus is not connecting eternal life to a place (like heaven) rather Jesus is connecting it with a person – indicating that it is all about a relationship. It is a relationship with a person with whom we can be connected from anywhere - anytime.

Jesus says, eternal life is ‘knowing’ God. If eternal life is ‘knowing’ God, then the obvious question is ‘how do I get to know God?’ The answer lies in the understanding what the Bible means by the word ‘know’.

In Gen 4.1 we read, ‘Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain’. Here Adam is not knowing Eve intellectually – that won’t produce children – but he had an intimate, personal experience with her. So the word ‘know’ speaks here of a knowing in the most intimate way possible which involves involvement. Likewise, when Jesus says that eternal life is knowing God, he is speaking of having an intimate, close, personal relationship with God.

This calls us to discern between the knowledge (intellectual) we have about God – and relationship with God. This means - even if we believe that Jesus died for our sins we may still don’t have a close, personal, intimate relationship with God. In James 2.19 we read, ‘You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder’. In Mark 1.24 we see demons not only recognising Jesus – but even testifying of his divinity’ (Son of God).

This should open our eyes to move one step further in our Christian life. We all have lots of knowledge about God – all sorts of information/facts to win a Bible challenge. However this knowledge is not an evidence of knowing God. Like in all relationships, the knowledge we have is to be expressed through our actions – the knowledge we have about the things that are close to God’s heart - is to be reflected in our daily life - living in communion with God - living in the way that God wants us to live - and involve in things around us that are important to God. That is knowing God.

This is the difference between the early church and modern church: they had much more than a doctrine and a hope - their relationship with the Lord wasn’t waiting to start in heaven, but was working in them while they were still in this world. They had a present-tense relationship. That is not to take anything away from heaven, but we are supposed to have eternal life (close, intimate, personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ) right now. It’s not ‘pie in the sky’ but rather ‘steak on your plate while you wait.’

Two weeks back we prayed in the Collect, ‘Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life...’

As in the prayer, following his steps leads to eternal life. It is knowing God as Jesus knew. It is living forever with the Father and the Son like the Father and the Son – starting here and now. So eternal life is being with God.

May God give us grace to understand what this means to our lives and demands from us – and thus live in the way that God wants us to live. Amen.