I want to begin this morning with what I hope may be a liberating confession – liberating both for you and for me! – about the Gospel according to John. It’s this: for me, John’s Gospel is really challenging and difficult – especially, as it happens, chapter 17. I find myself going along with what I imagine to be his train of thought but then getting caught out because he takes an unexpected turn and says something that doesn’t seem to fit at all. He keeps on not saying what I think he’s going to say!

At one level, this can be very frustrating. It makes reading John’s Gospel – let alone preaching on it! – an even more challenging task than it would otherwise be. On the other hand, isn’t it the parts of the Bible which surprise us that do us the most good? The unexpected is what really stimulates our thinking and changes the way we seek to behave. For me, to dip into John’s Gospel often feels as though God is very definitely placing his hand on the tiller and applying a course correction to my life as a follower of Jesus.

We could easily spend an entire sermon series on the things that might do that for us in the passage we have just heard as today’s Gospel reading. I want, though, to focus on just one. It comes in verse 11, where Jesus prays ‘Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one’.

It’s an almost throw-away line, isn’t it? We’re inclined to take for granted the fact that Jesus wants his followers to be united: that’s the major theme of what we call his ‘high-priestly prayer’ in this chapter. We know that. We find it challenging, yes. But at least we know it.

Or do we? Listen again to what Jesus is actually praying: Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

It’s extraordinary, isn’t it? Jesus is asking that his followers may experience the same depth and intensity of unity with one another that he himself experiences with his heavenly Father. That’s how high he is setting the bar. If we have ever felt embarrassed about praying big prayers on the grounds that asking for the moon feels faintly foolish, here is strong encouragement not to be daunted by the big vision but to keep praying for the apparently impossible!

‘That they may be one, as we are one.’ Here’s how Archbishop William Temple comments on this in his ‘Readings in St John’s Gospel’:

“Before the loftiness of that hope and calling our little experience of unity and fellowship is humbled to the dust... Let all of us who are concerned in Peace Movements or Faith and Order Movements or ‘Conversations’ with fellow-Christians of other denominations, take note of the judgment under which we stand by virtue of the gulf separating the level of our highest attainment and noblest enterprise, from the prize of the ‘call upwards which God gives us in Christ Jesus’ that they may be one as we are one.”

So... how are we to take this forward? How does it apply to us?

First, delving into the nuances of the original Greek tells us that when Jesus asks that his followers ‘may be one as he and the Father are one’ he means ‘may they may experience more fully the unity they already have’ rather than
simply ‘may they somehow become what they are clearly not’. He is asking that we may put into practice the unity
that is already ours rather than begin again from scratch. Unity is an integral part of what it is to be a Christian in the
first place. We need to maintain and express it, yes. But we don’t need to create it. The wiring is already there. What
we need to do is to switch it on.

Secondly, let’s look again at what exactly it is that Jesus asks in order for us to be one as he and the Father are one.
‘Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.’ It’s not at
all what we would expect him to say, is it? Why can’t he be more obvious and straightforward? ‘Protect them in your
name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.’ What on earth does that mean?

It’s not so much the case in our day – but in the Bible someone’s name is very much linked with their character. So,
for example, we find, from time to time, people being given new names in order to reflect a change God brings
about in them – Jacob to Israel, for example, in the Old Testament, or Simon to Peter in the New. So when he says
‘protect them in your name’, Jesus is asking the Father that his followers may be kept safe under the umbrella of the
character of God. But more than that – for one of the central features of the Christian Faith is that the character of
God is perfectly reflected in Jesus himself. Like father like son! This is what leads him to say ‘protect them in your
name that you have given me’.

When it comes to exploring John’s Gospel, I’ve found that Bruce Milne is a commentator who often helps where
others don’t. Here’s what he has to say about this: “God’s name is basically his revealed character. In the Old
Testament, God represents himself to the people of Israel under a variety of names, each of which teaches
something important about who he is. Jesus has brought the disciples a whole new understanding of God. In a sense
he has given God a new name. That revelation of God will now keep them. As they remain loyal to the truth Jesus
has shared with them, and allow it to remain in their minds, shaping [their] understanding and directing [their]
conduct, they will continue ‘in his name’ and be protected from all the attacks of world and devil.”

That’s right, isn’t it? The more our lives are illuminated, shaped, informed, fed by the character of Jesus Christ, the
more we shall reflect that character in the way we live. The quality of the relationships we have with one another is
inextricably linked with the quality of the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ – something which,
towards the end of the New Testament, the apostle John expresses very simply in just seven words: ‘We love,’ he
writes, ‘because he first loved us’.

Which is what we’re doing here today. Gathering together to revel in the character of God revealed in Christ,
focusing supremely on the love which undergirds all that he is and all that he does. Something which, as the
followers of Jesus, we’re invited to do every day through our prayer, through our reading of the Scriptures, through
our engagement with the world that God loves to love through us, through our fellowship with one another. To echo
what we prayed just before the Gospel reading, ‘Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in
them the fire of your love’. Amen.