

## It's a mystery

Thoughts for Trinity Sunday preached by Revd Anthony Buckley, Area Dean of Oxford, 30 May 2021

*Refs: Isaiah 6.1-8; Romans 8. 12-17; John 3.1-17*

The New Testament is rather like people coming tumbling out of a cinema, heading to the nearest café or pub, and trying to work out what was going on. One of the outcomes was the development of the doctrine that we now call the Trinity, that in some way beyond our understanding, there are three 'persons' in the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They looked at what Jesus had said and done, and that death could not hold him, they looked at what Jesus said about the power of the Spirit, and what indeed they had experienced at Pentecost and after and believed that both the Son and the Spirit were in some inexplicable and unimaginable way, God, as was the Father in Heaven. And so we hear of Jesus saying: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

There is so much one could say, but three quick points at this stage. First it is surprising and intriguing that the early church stuck so fast to this doctrine even though it cost so many lives and is so difficult to picture or explain. It seems they really thought it to be true, that this was what all the evidence pointed to. Second, it is unsurprising that they cannot explain the Trinity completely – if any of us ever feel that we can explain God completely and coherently then it is somewhat unlikely that it is God we are explaining. Third it reminds us that God not only loves, but, in the words of the apostle John, he *is* love, he is relationship. And so all of our relationships, all of our love, in some way have the faintest imprint of the character of God.

That was by way of introduction! But do not worry, the following thoughts will be brief. There is such richness in these passages, but may I draw out attention to five points. First, the opening of Isaiah 6 reminds us of the glory of God. If ever we perhaps take our faith a little for granted, then this vision can refresh us. Like much of the scriptures, it benefits from being read aloud, even slightly dramatically.

*"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory"*

Second, and then we have Isaiah's reaction. He knows his need of God, that compared to this glorious vision he is so obviously not worthy. (Some of us may be thinking of Narnia: *if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly.*) But he agrees to obey, he agrees to go on his quest. *Here I am, send me.* Every day we will be called live out the love, justice, kindness of God; may we follow Isaiah's example. *Here I am, send me.*

Third, in our gospel reading we are reminded that, like the wind, the Spirit moves where he wishes. If we like being in absolute control, then this is rather a challenge! He will be at work in us and through us, in our neighbour, through our neighbour. Wind changes things, and so does the Spirit. And challenges and opportunities may come our way. The Spirit moves like the wind, and that keeps us humble, and keeps things exciting. Last Monday the Church remembered John Wesley, who on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 found his heart was "strangely warmed" as he listened to Luther's preface to Paul's letter to the Romans. His life was changed, the Spirit was at work, and then the world was changed.

Fourth, in our epistle we have this extraordinary statement that we can call God father. For those used to the idea of complicated rituals, ceremonies, priesthoods, temple geography, the idea that we, like a child, can simply say “Abba, papa, father” must have been stunning. The way to God truly is open. Whenever we say *Our Father...* let us remember that, in Paul’s words, we truly have become part of the family. Or, as John says in his first letter, *Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we can be called children of God, and this is what we are*

Fifth, back to our Gospel reading, because a preacher cannot really have these passages in front of them and not refer to the most translated verse in the Bible!

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”*

We note the emphasis on love, we note the sacrifice (this was his *only* Son). We note that this is a gift (*he gave*) And that he comes to bring life – kingdom life in all its quality, not just quantity. We also note the destructiveness of sin – in old fashioned but accurate language, sin separates, spreads and spoils. It causes a shrinking, a shrivelling, a perishing. And we note that we receive eternal life by faith – simply trusting him. The invitation is offered, do we trust him enough to go to the party? Much to think about, much to be thankful for, on Trinity Sunday.

May I finish with a quote from Adrian Plass. He is describing a conversation between three of his characters in his “The Horizontal Epistles of Andromeda Veal.”

*Frank lit his pipe and said, ‘You know, there are four things I like about the Trinity. First, I love having a father in God. Second, I love having a friend and brother in Jesus. Third, I love having a comforter and guide in the Holy Spirit. And fourth...’*

*Anne and I said, ‘Yes?’*

*‘Fourth, I love the fact that it’s a mystery. God in three persons. Three persons – one God. It’s a mystery and love it.’*