

Bound together in love

A sermon preached by Rev Charles Draper in St Peter's Sunday 29 July 2018

Refs: Ephesians 3 v 14-21; John 6 v 1-21

I am not a physicist, but I'm going to risk starting today with a bit of physics. One of the intriguing things about our Universe is that the huge macroscopic level and the tiny microscopic level look quite alike. When you look at the sky at night, it looks at first like a random splash of stars, but of course it's far from random. It's made up of solar systems like ours, where planets orbit in circles around stars while moons orbit in circles around planets. And those stars and solar systems are part of great galaxies all orbiting in spiral patterns around their centre in a long slow majestic dance. All those stars, planets and moons are in a relationship with each other, always moving yet held together by gravitational forces.

At the smallest levels of being we find something similar. In every atom, groups of electrons spin around the nucleus, like the orbit of planets around stars but millions of times faster, while in the nucleus powerful forces hold the protons and neutrons together. There is a remarkable similarity between a solar system at one extreme, and the inside of an atom at the other – and what they have in common is that the heavenly bodies and the particles alike move around each other and yet are always in relationship with each other, bound together by powerful forces.

It's not far-fetched to see that in some way this reflects the nature of God himself – God the Holy Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit – all one, one God, each acting in very different ways, yet always in the closest possible relationship, bound together in one being by the powerful force of infinite love.

And it is even easier to see here a pattern for human living. "It's not good for man to be alone" says Genesis 2 – human beings are created to be in relationship, each of us distinct individuals acting in different ways, yet always in relationship with each other, bound together in love.

And I think all of this is what our epistle today is all about. I love this passage from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians – it is a dense piece of Trinitarian spirituality, and is well worth a closer look.

Interestingly, St Paul starts with human relationships – relationships that we all know and are familiar with: *"The Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name."*

St Paul isn't talking nuclear families here. In ancient society, as in many parts of the world today, people would have lived in extended families – grandparents, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces often included. Not a neat and tidy family with two parents and 2.4 children – but a wonderful untidy messy collection of people – so when we think of family here, we should think of wider family, and friendships and our church family too.

I think St Paul is implying that we are created to live in relationship with others, whether that is in our wider family, or amongst our friends or in our church family. And this reflects the nature of God himself, God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bound together in love. This is reflected in the structures of our Universe – solar systems, galaxies or atoms, all existing and moving in relationship with each other. The spiritual writer Richard Rohr calls it "The Divine Dance" – the nature of God the Trinity, the pattern of the universe, and the way we human beings are created to live, in relationship with each other.

St Paul quickly moves on to how we each of us relate to God and the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's important we move on quickly too, because if we emphasise human relationships alone, then the whole area becomes painful and difficult. Because of course the painful reality is that human relationships are often fractured, often difficult, and of course all human relationships are transitory, because of our mortality. If we want to find eternal security in our relationships, we must start with God.

Because it is with God that we find an unbreakable, eternal, unshakeable relationship. It is only with God himself, our faithful and unchangeable God, that we can truly know that we will never be alone.

And it is in God that we find not only a secure and unchangeable relationship with God himself but also the hope that in God our relationships with each other are not for this life alone, but will be ours for eternity also. And even now in this life we will find that the closer we grow to God, then the closer we are able to grow to others around us as well. God is not only the ground of our one eternal relationship with him, but also the ground on which we can build our relationships with one another as well.

So what does St Paul show us in this passage of what a relationship with God can be like?

Firstly it is Trinitarian. This is a relationship with the Father, through the Spirit, focussed on the limitless love of Christ. This is about us being filled with the fullness of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Whatever picture we may have of the Trinity, the most important thing is to grasp the inclusive, welcoming nature of God the Trinity, who invites us in to dwell in the very centre of his Trinitarian love.

It is also about us welcoming God into our lives, into our very selves, into the very centre of our being. St Paul talks of the Holy Spirit strengthening us in our inner being, of Christ dwelling in our hearts, of us being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. This is about us welcoming God into the innermost part of ourselves, not shutting him out of parts of ourselves, but gradually learning to open up every part of ourselves to his presence and his love. This will be for us a journey of going deeper – not just deeper into God, but deeper into ourselves as we allow the healing transforming love of God to go ever deeper into the centre of our being.

Finally, this is a journey without limit, where there is always more to explore and more to discover. St Paul piles up the superlatives – he speaks of us comprehending the breadth and length and height and depth – of us knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Perhaps as we hear our Gospel today – with its picture of Jesus feeding the five thousand, and then appearing to his disciples in the dark walking across the lake – we get a picture of this Jesus who is beyond our understanding, beyond our grasp, even beyond our imagining. This is the Jesus, who inspires awe and wonder and yet who takes away the disciples' fear. I love that bit in the gospel reading where they see Jesus walking on the lake and are terrified. Then Jesus says "It is I, do not be afraid". They remember this is the same Jesus who they know very well and have learned to trust. This is the Jesus whose love we are invited to contemplate in awe and wonder. And yet St Paul says however much we have grasped the greatness and the depth of his love for us, we will still not have got it all. There will always be more yet to discover. There is no limit for us – St Paul prays that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. That seems ridiculous and impossible, and yet St Paul is affirming there is no limit for us either in our capacity to know God and come close to God. There is no point when God will say to us enough, no further. Always God will keep inviting us on, deeper, closer, with no limit and nothing held back from what he wants to give us.

And that is where St Paul finishes, with a clear statement at the end that what God can do in each one of us is far greater than we expect or imagine. We each have a potential for spiritual growth in God that is far greater and far deeper than we realise.

So this passage is an invitation – an invitation to live our whole lives within the life and love of God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's an invitation to root our lives in the love of God, to grow deeper in this relationship which is the ground of all our other relationships. Here we are assured that we can truly be what God created us to be, and that truly we will never be alone. And it is an exciting invitation to go on a journey of exploration without end, ever deeper into the love of God, allowing God

ever deeper into our own selves. And as we discover there is no limit to the love of God in Christ, so we will also discover there is no limit to our own capacity to know God and come close to him.

Amen