

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Jo Coney* at 8.00am and 10.00am at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Trinity Sunday 3rd June, 2012.

Readings: Isaiah 6, 1-8; Romans 8, 12-17; John 3, 1-17

Trinity Sunday – the day when we celebrate the Father Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God – yet interestingly this is the one festival in the Christian year that does not relate to *events* that have happened or that will happen in time. **Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Passiontide, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost** all relate to specific events in Christ's life on earth. But Trinity Sunday is different – it refers to a reality that has no date and it leads us to ask - when did God become the Holy Trinity? Was he always the three-in-one creator, redeemer and sustainer - was he always Father Son and Holy Spirit? A difficult question I don't intend to try and answer this morning!

What we do know is that Trinity Sunday is the essential reminder, coming round once every year, that we cannot manage God – we cannot even imagine him. How **can** three be one? It defies both logic and understanding for if we could understand God – contain him – then he would cease to **be** GOD. When we are dealing with theology and faith we are always dealing with something more than we can cope with. We are dealing with things too wonderful for us to know – and we speak of things which we do not understand. God will always be beyond the capacity of our human minds. As Rowan Williams has said – we can but “*let God be God*”.

However this does not really let us off the hook! We live by faith as well as knowledge and it is FAITH that teaches us that God is indeed three in one, Father Son and Holy Spirit. This is spelt out clearly in our collect this morning when we pray that we may be led

‘ by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity’

We can acknowledge it by faith even when we cannot understand it by knowledge. The *unity* of the Trinity is what holds it together. The ‘three-in-one’, when together, makes the whole. Each part is necessary and without all three it is not whole – it is not complete – it lacks integrity. For God, in the unity of the Trinity, is the epitome of integration and completeness. So it is for us the supreme example of utter integrity, integrity meaning completeness, honesty, authenticity. And the opposite of which is dis-integration, brokenness, less than fully honest, less than whole.

And we only have to look around us to know that we live in a fractured and dis-integrated world. Yet, within this world, we are called to become real and authentic, whole people, believers who live, as it were, in two necessary dimensions and to strive, with God's grace, to integrate the two into one - the flesh and the spirit - the human and the divine - the earthly and the heavenly - within time and in eternity.

And our supreme example, our model, is of course Christ himself. Looking at Jesus we see a man – and we see God – two realities in one integrated life. The earthly and the heavenly become perfectly integrated. From his poor and humble birth to his prophetic life on the margins and ultimately by his resurrection – the life of Christ

expresses the Father's decision to make himself visible to all. So in looking at the man Jesus we see God himself, a human person who becomes a sacrament of God. Christ is the representative of the human race before God. We are promised that, by the transformation of grace, we may live in Christ as he lives in us. So we too, are to become sacraments of God to the world. We are never going to fully understand how it works because we can not have God's perspective on it all. ALL we DO know is that, through the gift of the spirit, we are called to pray, to trust and to live with the integrity before God (to live 'holy' lives) that leaves the door open to let things come together so that God's love can come through.

We believe in a God who is creator of all things visible and invisible, a God of the here and now, AND in the life that is to come. This is in fact something of deeply practical and personal meaning, it is about the possibility of an integrated life. We have seen yet again, in the stories of Easter, Jesus, in his resurrection appearances, doing what he always did, talking, eating, loving, making God present in his actual presence, in voice and touch. So God reveals himself as Trinity - from His inaccessibility in the Old Testament, where he is hidden in the ark of the covenant and in the temple and only approachable by a few special priests - to the New Testament where in the human person of Jesus, by his incarnation, He becomes accessible in one place and in one time and to a relatively small number of people - and then at Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, He becomes accessible to all people, and for all time. God has breathed into his disciples, and into us, his 'spirit', the breath of life, so that we are equipped to do what he does - to speak with his voice to the world. So the revelation in the Trinity is complete. God is one integrated whole.

And so on this Trinity Sunday we have a renewed opportunity to look again at the supreme model of unity, integrity and wholeness - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's all very well but what, we may ask, has all this to do with our Gospel reading. How is the story of Nicodemus relevant to us on this Trinity Sunday? It's certainly not immediately obvious! Looking at the story in more detail we learn that Nicodemus was an intellectual, a member of the prestigious Sanhedrin, not prepared to be seen coming to Jesus in broad day light so coming by night. It appears that he couldn't rest until he had heard Jesus first hand. We know that he came out of professional curiosity, with a willingness to learn, starting from the premise that Jesus must be genuine or he would not be preaching and healing as he did. It was a good start and Jesus built on it to such effect that Nicodemus was later, as we learn from St John's Gospel, not only to speak out for justice in the Sanhedrin, but also later on, to give generous practical help to Joseph of Aramathea in attending the body of Jesus after the crucifixion.

So Nicodemus was a man of compassion with a legal and enquiring mind. A man used to weighing up evidence with a passion for truth and justice. His encounter with Jesus was an encounter of mutual respect and courtesy as we see from the fact that they each refer to the other as 'Rabbi'. It was a meeting full of genuine concern with important issues. Nicodemus it seems was a man of utter integrity. And yet he was still not able to make that final leap of faith, to accept the whole of Jesus' person and teaching. There was one part of Nicodemus that just could not understand or accept the reality and necessity, or even the *possibility*, of being 'born again', of living in both the world of the flesh AND the world of the spirit. There was a part of him that held back and just couldn't handle what Jesus was telling him.

And perhaps many of us are in the same position. Are there parts of the gospel that we cannot handle or accept? Can we really accept the baptism of the spirit, of being born again? I would suggest that to be fully integrated Christians we must both accept it and also live it. Our readings make this clear. Jesus says *'no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit'* and in our reading from Romans *'if you live by the flesh you will die – but if you live by the spirit you will live'* and *'all who are led by the spirit are children of God'*.

So we are called to live not only in this world of the body but also in the spirit, in eternal life in this world and the next, in the here and now and in eternity. But what does this actually mean? At face value it seems to mean that we are to value the things of eternal life, things of God, above things of this world. To live by God's truth rather than by worldly standards. This is certainly true.

But maybe it's even more fundamental than that and we have to go one step further. If we are to live in the spirit, in eternal life, then life cannot end when our bodies die. Physical death cannot be the end. So in view of this we must live our earthly lives with our eyes firmly focused, **not** on the horizon of the death of our bodies, but always on the horizon of everlasting life with God himself whom, we are promised, we shall see 'face to face'. If our sights are set on that *eternal* horizon it cannot **but** determine the way we live now, the decisions and choices we make, the way we relate to one another and, above all, the way we relate to God himself. It will be dictated by the long view, with bodily death an event on the way to full knowledge and life with God.

And our example of how we might try and do this is of course Jesus himself. He is our model for living in this present dimension of time and space, constricted as we are like him in an earthly body, but **also** with eyes firmly fixed beyond this world and on eternal life with God, beyond the grave. And if we are to live as best we can as Jesus did, we must take his *whole* life as our example, not just some aspects of it, the bits we find easy and comfortable. We must also take into account the example of his suffering and death. The cross, His and ours, is a necessary part and indeed to be welcomed. If we too want to live as closely as we can to Christ, we need to take to heart Jesus' saying *'unless a grain of wheat dies - it cannot bear fruit'* so we too must welcome the sufferings that come our way, as well as the joys, and pray that we may learn to rejoice in all things and to see them as opportunities to identify more closely with our Lord, to be enabled to worship our Trinitarian God with authenticity and integrity.

So let our prayer on this Trinity Sunday be that we might, little by little, become more fully integrated and Christ-like people,

People who praise God the **Father**, the creator, who gave us bodies to live in this created world

People who praise God the **Son**, who through his incarnation, his life in this world, his teaching and suffering, brought us salvation

People who praise God the **Spirit**, who leads us beyond this world and into eternal life.

Amen