

## HOLY TRINITY LAUNCESTON 7 JUNE 2009

### TRINITY SUNDAY – SERMON NOTES

#### Readings for Trinity Sunday Year B

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.'

Such Trinitarian statements are strong statements which give rise to strong reactions: ridicule, rejection, blasphemy (Muslims and Jews), acceptance.

Some people view the Christian understanding of God as Trinity, as Christian non-sense!

They ask,

- How can  $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ ?

Yet, certainly  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ !

You may have heard the story of the Jewish man who was crossing the road when he was knocked down by a car.

A woman rang for an ambulance and an Anglican priest ran to the stricken man to see if he could offer some help.

Kneeling down the priest took the man's limp hand and said, "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit?"

The injured man raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Here I am dying and he asks me riddles!"

This man's difficulty in understanding the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity is shared by many people.

God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit may well seem like a riddle or a mathematical puzzle.

The full understanding of God is beyond human understanding. We ask,

#### **WHAT IS GOD LIKE?**

Do you recall the story of the blind men and the elephant?

It is sometimes told to show that we cannot know God at all.

Let me explain.

Some blind men come across an elephant.

One blind man feels the elephant's trunk and says the elephant is a snake.

Another blind man feels the elephant's side and says the elephant is a wall.'

The third blind man feels the tail and says the elephant is a rope.

The fourth blind man feels the elephant's tusk and says the elephant is a spear.

The fifth blind man feels the elephant's leg and says the elephant is a tree.

Therefore, so the conclusion goes, we are like blind men with God. We can only know God partially. We must accept humbly that we cannot know what God is like. Clearly, all descriptions of God are equally valid.

Does this seem correct? It is not. This commonly used illustration has a logical flaw: Have you got it? Yes,

Someone knew that the object the blind men were feeling was in fact an elephant!

How then can we know what God is like?

### **WHO IS GOD LIKE?**

"What if God was one of us?" is the title of a popular song written by Joan Osborne. Some lines are thought provoking. Listen to this:

If God had a name, what would it be  
And would you call it to His face  
If you were faced with Him in all His glory  
What would you ask if you had just one question

If God had a face, what would it look like  
And would you want to see  
If seeing meant that you would have to believe  
In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints  
And all the Prophets

What if God was one of us?

### **CONSIDER THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST**

Perhaps the most dramatic appearance of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, occurs at Jesus' baptism,

<sup>21</sup>Now when . . . when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."  
Luke 3:21-22

The Gospel according to John records the Trinitarian nature of God by showing God at work.

The first disciples came to believe in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because they witnessed Jesus' life and saw God.

They also experienced the work of the Holy Spirit and witnessed God at work. They prayed the prayer Jesus gave them, 'Our Father', and they worshipped God in Three persons, the Holy Trinity.

In this Trinity Sunday we can follow some of the experience of Nicodemus as he grows in his commitment to follow Christ.

The Gospel reading, John 3:1-17, tells us how Nicodemus, a religious leader, came to Jesus under the cover of darkness, and asked him what it means to be born from above.

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered (Nicodemus), "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. John 3:5,6

<sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:17

In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, John 3:1-17, we encounter the Trinity through a series of actions.

All three persons of the Trinity are at work.

The Holy Spirit is giving birth to God's children (verse 6)

The Father is giving and sending his Son (16,17)

The Son is testifying to the Father and the Spirit ( 6-8,17)

Martin Luther called John 3:16 "The Gospel in Brief."

What drives God's desire to see us born of the Spirit?

- LOVE! "agape"- self-giving love
- Love for all the "cosmos"- world!

This love is at the centre of God's very being.

The three persons of the Trinity are eternally in love.

This love is offered to us! Amazing!

I have long been intrigued by Nicodemus. What happened to him? Did this clandestine conversation with Jesus mean anything to him?

Did Jesus' answer to his question seem more like an insoluble riddle than a truth to be grasped and lived?

The awesome truth Jesus told Nicodemus is that God in love sent his Son to rescue humankind and that this is a birth from above, a second birth given by the Spirit. God is the life giver in this spiritual birth 'from above' or birth 'again' [same word in the Greek].

How would we know if Nicodemus was born of the Spirit?

As the unseen wind effects the trees, so the Spirit effects the life of the person who is born of the Spirit. We would expect to see the effect of the Spirit in Nicodemus' life. Well, what do we see?

### **Nicodemus appears twice more in John's account of Jesus' life.**

Do you recall how the rulers and the Pharisees, having failed to have the Temple police arrest Jesus, were accusing them of incompetence when Nicodemus spoke up in defense of Jesus. This earned him a stinging rebuke from the rulers.

<sup>50</sup>Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, <sup>51</sup>"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

<sup>52</sup>They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." John 7:50-52

Nicodemus' final appearance is very moving; Nicodemus is helping Joseph of Arimathea embalm Jesus' body following the crucifixion. This is truly a labour of love. And like his two previous meetings with Jesus, a high risk operation! Nicodemus, a religious leader, is caring for an executed blasphemer's corpse!

Remember the Burial of Jesus:

<sup>38</sup>After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

<sup>39</sup>Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

<sup>40</sup>They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

<sup>41</sup>Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

<sup>42</sup>And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. John 19:39-42

Had something happened in the life of Nicodemus?

Was he changed? Had he been born from above, born again by the wind of the Spirit?

The Spirit continues this transforming work today.

### **Jesus identified himself with God.**

It was Jesus' coming that revealed the mystery of God's nature and person.

#### Christ spoke of God as his Father:

<sup>18</sup>For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. John 5:18

#### Christ speaks of the Spirit:

<sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, John 14:16,17a

Christians say that the resurrection of Christ from death is true.

What is the result of the resurrection of Jesus?

The resurrection results in worship of Jesus Christ. - Jesus Christ is God!

#### Jesus accepts worship of himself as God:

Imagine the scene as Jesus says to Thomas,

<sup>27</sup> "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

*\*We might think, 'Believe what?'*

<sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

John 20:27-29

The Great Commission of Jesus to the Church is the grand finale to Matthew's account of Jesus' life and ministry, with these words,

<sup>19</sup>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, Matthew 28:19

Following the ascension of Christ to the right-hand of God, the disciples continue to meet, pray and open the Scriptures.

Just imagine the disciples huddled around the two men who walked with Jesus on the Emmaus Road.

Just imagine the number of times they were asked to repeat the words of Jesus.

Just imagine savouring each and every word of Jesus, told to them by these men who had walked with Jesus on the Emmaus Road.

Just imagine their growing understanding as they studied the Scriptures.

These words would have been repeated, pondered, prayed over and discussed to the very early hours of those expectant mornings.

### **EXPERIENCE OF THE CHURCH**

As the disciples prayed the Holy Spirit fell upon them in power and they proclaimed the extra-ordinary message of Christ crucified, died and risen.

The Church repeats this sacred mantra ever time we meet to break bread at the Lord's Supper.

“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

The Apostle Paul's letters resonated with God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Paul's blessing has become a household blessing in the Church of God:

<sup>13</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2 Corinthians 13:13

### **EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE!**

In the very beginning the disciples worshipped Christ as God, and they also prayed to God as Father, as did Jesus who taught them to pray,

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come’

We baptize and confirm Christians

‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’

The congregation having said the Apostles Creed with its Trinitarian structure of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, affirms:

‘This is our faith: We believe in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’

And their experience of the Holy Spirit led them to worship the three persons of the Godhead yet as One God! How do you explain that? Well, with difficulty!

### **REREADING SCRIPTURE FROM THE ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST**

Genesis chapter 18 and the mysterious three visitors to Abraham and Sarah.

The icon by Andrei Rublev in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The early Christians experienced the Trinity, and began speaking of their experiences and then speaking in language that reflected the ‘Three-in-One God: father, Son and Holy Spirit’.

The early Christians also began to hear God spoken of in ways that did not fit their experience and scriptural understanding of God. Some of these incorrect ways minimized their new understanding of God. The Christians were then forced to express their understanding of God more thoroughly and more clearly. This explanation is the doctrine of the Trinity, the Tri-une God.

The great Councils of the Church at Nicea, 325AD and Constantinople, 381AD, expressed the understanding of the Tri-une God, the Trinity:

The Nicene Creed (in part):

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. . . .*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, . . .*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. . . .*

Followers of Christ continue to repeat these sacred words as Sunday by Sunday they meet for worship of the Tri-une God.

### **Art, poetry, liturgy, words and Music**

These are the languages of love. We use them to express our love of God.

I am sure that the disciples discussed Jesus and their growing devotion to him as God, a great deal. This demands language that we cannot contain or explain fully.

For example, I cannot explain why my wife loves me, let alone why God does, or who God is! And perhaps like my wife's love for me, I simply accept the unexplainable, and I rejoice and be glad for this love of God is good news. I can begin to explain some aspects of love, of God. I hold to these but they will never explain everything.

What then does this mean?

### **THE CHALLENGE?**

Perhaps it is returning to the final stanza of Joan Osborne's song, and her haunting question:

If God had a face, what would it look like  
 And would you want to see  
 If seeing meant that you would have to believe  
 In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints  
 And all the Prophets

'If seeing meant that you would have to believe'  
 and believing means living, living God's way; the Jesus way.

**A reflection on living by the Spirit as per the Romans 8 reading.**

***Three important life questions are answered here:***

Who am I?

- A child of God
- An heir

What am I here for?

- Life and peace in the Spirit

Where am I going?

- Joint heir with Christ of eternal life
- 'you will live'

We are to believe and so to live.

In being drawn into the life of the Trinity of love we share the very love of the Trinity here in this life on earth.

Thus we are to pray to God both liturgically in our community life, and in our personal life. We pray 'Our Father . . .' (Mt 6:9) through the Son and in the power of the Spirit who helps us in our weakness (Rm 8:26).

The Trinity helps us not only in prayer, but in all of life to live the Jesus life. We are to love not just our friends and family, but our enemies as well (Mt 5:45).

We believe in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and so find love and life.

May the Triune God of all glory give us the passion and will to do so.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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