

SERMON 11 MAY 2017 TRINITY SUNDAY

In many ways, it seems rather a strange thing that here we are, in this rather lovely church with its stained-glass windows; this place that holds memories of different times and many different people who are no longer with us. Here we are, come together again, some of us returned travellers who have ventured far afield, some of us coming from weeks that have been full of things apart from our church life, some of us just getting on with life and trying to keep warm and dry. Here we all are, and we are thinking about the Trinity! It's not really a great draw-card that makes people think "O good! It's Trinity Sunday! I must come and celebrate that!" If we were to step outside and say to passers-by "Come and join us because it is Trinity Sunday", what sort of reaction might we get? Even more, if we were on the other side of the world near London Bridge and the Borough Markets, or in Manchester or Paris, or even in Melbourne, do we think that knowing this day would have any meaning for us at all? You don't need to answer that question. But we are here, and we are going to think about what difference, if any, the Trinity could make to us.

I know we don't feel it is an easy topic. Last year on this day I said that some ministers choose to go on holiday this weekend. This year there is more of an excuse because it is a long weekend. I have preached on the Trinity quite often. I have spoken about what difference it makes that we have a relational God, never static, always dynamic and reaching out in that movement of love that the Trinity demonstrates. It does make a difference that we are released from a fixed and rigid notion of one God, because that notion inevitably gradually becomes even more rigid as our limited human minds are easily drawn to the security of fixed boundaries. But that rigidity is such a contrast to the dynamic of the relational God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustaining Spirit who touches our hungry hearts that look for meaning and hope. This is the hunger that draw us out of ourselves, to each other and to struggling humanity and creation around us. In this we begin to see how the Trinity does address today's issues and can make a difference in our lives today.

This morning the lectionary gave us the reading of the familiar creation story from the very beginning of our Bible, where people tried to put into words what was really impossible to explain – the mystery of how this earth and all that is in it comes to exist at all. Someone asked why we have this reading on Trinity Sunday, but the three-in-one God is all there: creating, speaking things into being through God's Word whom, like John at the beginning of his gospel, we name as Christ; then the Spirit which hovered over all of this from the start. The three are all involved in God's good creation. God who builds up, who grows things and gives life. God who gives over responsibility to humankind.

People were and are given dominion, but that was not so we could dominate but so we might tend. And we have failed. And we go on failing. Yet some still feel they have a right to power over, not reverence for. In these times it feels as though we are on the brink, being forced, almost too late, to really look again at our lives, from the smallest simplest things, to the big things that have immediate consequences. People do care and are increasingly looking for ways to express their caring. We know that millions of people's lives are threatened. And we care. We can feel helpless. I believe there is something very important in our Christian faith and belief that helps us, because, in today's readings we come to see how much God cares, what God has done and goes on doing, to strengthen us in what we do. God has made what is good. When we value what is good we can, like St Francis whom I have referred to on the cover page, find the commitment of faith to inform our actions. The dynamic, recreating God is what is good news for today's world. The Word goes on calling us and all people to listen and to respond.

Maybe that is the easy bit this Sunday! It relates to the natural world we all share. What about this world where we all live under the seeming dark shadow of terror, where environmental concerns are apparently of no consequence because inflicting fear and violence for some supposedly "religious" end has over-ruled anything humane? How can religion, how can Christianity speak with credibility into this and be heard? How can any doctrine, never mind the Trinity, have any credence?

On the one hand it could seem quite simple. This master-narrative of terror and violence spreads around it a whole wave of vicarious trauma. There are millions around the world who are affected by this feeling of threat, whether quite consciously or at a sub-conscious level. It is hard to avoid it. We see it played out relentlessly in our media. We are now being made aware of a message that has changed from “Keep Calm and Carry On” to “Run, Hide, Tell”. This is the world we live in, the world we share. We can’t hide ourselves away or pretend that it is not happening. The fact that there has always been violence and terrorism doesn’t carry much weight in these times when our interconnected globalised world brings everything into our living rooms. That is how it is as we sit in this place on a Sunday morning.

What is the gospel for us today? It can’t be any trite little good-news statements or platitudes that don’t sustain any weight. We do have a gospel for our times. There is a different narrative from the one of threat and fear, from a world where people close their doors in suspicion of those who are different. What is this gospel and how do we hear it, understand it and live within it? Week after week we turn to the Scriptures, in which, we proclaim, we hear the word of God speaking to us. It is the task of the preacher to make the words that have come from another age and culture relevant. Maybe a lot of people dismiss the Bible as no longer able to address us. At one time the Church could get away with that questioning because people still were carried along by the authority they felt in the Church. That time is long past and so people can lose sight of the meaning of the Bible and what Karl Barth, the towering theologian of the twentieth century viewed as the Bible’s “livingness”.

You may well be wondering where I am going with all this! There is, within the Bible, as I mentioned two weeks ago, that in which “deep calls to deep”. Barth writes, “There is a river in the Bible that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to it – away from ourselves to the sea”. This is not about escapism to some peaceful beach. That would be nice, even though we might have to pick up the plastic from the beach first! It is about that other narrative for life. Douglas John Hall,

the Canadian theologian whom I am reading at the moment, points to the Bible as a symbol of the Trinity. God's word is addressed to us in threefold form. It is the word written, the word preached or spoken, and the word revealed or incarnate. He says we cannot meet the incarnate Word in Jesus Christ apart from hearing the written word made present to us. The words remain just that, mere words, until we really encounter them. Then they bring about transformation. The Spirit is at work.

The point of all this is that, as we come together here on a Sunday, we come, hopefully, with ears open to hear and hearts to receive what, by God's grace, addresses our lives in our here and now. This is all part of the mystery that is God and the mystery that is our individual and communal lives. It is about being open to the fact that the Word of God in the Bible can and does speak to our lives today.

Today we have returned to Matthew's gospel after many weeks travelling with John. What we heard read this morning was what is called "The Great Commission". These verses follow on directly from Matthew's account of the Resurrection and Easter Sunday. The disciples have gathered on a hillside in Galilee and hear these last words from Jesus. Their written style is different from what precedes them and they are accepted as being a later addition. They seem to have been written down at a time when the Christian community was dispersed, knew about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and was receiving new members through baptism after they had heard about Jesus. Nowhere else in the gospels is there any allusion to the Trinity, to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It comes from the church in action. Yet did you notice that this great commission was given to the 11, some of whom still doubted?

There is something comforting about this little huddle of disciples with all their questioning, because what happened from this commissioning of them was the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world of the love of Christ, enabled by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. They were to baptise in the name of the Trinitarian God. Baptism can also be used in a wider sense, just as we use the phrase "baptism of fire". Whatever, it indicates an immersion, an immersion in the

goodness and love of God as shown in Christ Jesus. This is the God who builds up and grows things, as God did in the beginning time story from Genesis. This is the story we are immersed in through baptism, which is always baptism both into being part of suffering like Jesus but also the resurrection of the Christ.

We are immersed not only in the pain and fear of the world but in the mystery that is the story of violence and hatred overcome, even by those who doubted, ran away, and did not know what to do. The words of the baptismal service immerse us in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christians, from the beginning, have shared in this, when they have come to know the grace and love of Christ. This baptismal commitment is an immersion in real life through Jesus. Thomas Traherne, a 17th century poet, clergyman and theologian writes this: "I will not let the noise of bloody wars and the destroying of kings advance you to glory: but by the gentle ways of peace and love." These are words that address us today and are an example of a different narrative for our times.

Back in those early times, God, in the living Christ, kept on finding the disciples and the newly birthed Christian communities, believing in them, growing and transforming them, offering them the words we thought about two weeks ago: "Grace and Peace". The lectionary for today also sets down the verses from 2 Corinthians 13: 11-14. You can look them up, but we began the service today, as we do each week, with them as the Trinitarian "Greeting". Those words, which are really Paul's conclusion of his letter to the squabbling community in Corinth, are preceded by these, "Finally brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." If, in some statistically unlikely horror you find you have had to run, hide and tell, or are traumatised by what you see around you, those bold words from Scripture are a gospel statement for today. They tell another story and are the good news of the living Trinitarian God, for us and for everyone everywhere, the God who creates and grows all that is good.