

**The following sermon was given by lay preacher Philip Garside
at Wesley Methodist Church, 75 Taranaki Street, Wellington, NZ
on 11 June 2017 — Trinity Sunday**

**You can download an audio re-recording of this sermon by the preacher
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Bible reading:

Matthew 28:16-20 — The Commissioning of the Disciples

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Sermon: Good things come in threes...

Let's pray; May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our creator, redeemer and enabler. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is an opportunity to focus on our understandings of God as being one and yet also being three.

They say that bad luck come in threes... But good things can come in threes too. And that is what I have titled this sermon, "Good things come in Threes..."

Our gospel reading this morning comes right at the end of the book of Matthew. Jesus is crucified, and rises after three days. He appears to the women and tells the women to instruct the men, to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus again. The eleven remaining disciples go north to Galilee, climb a hill and Jesus appears to them as promised.

Note that Jesus reappears to the women – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – first. They are the first people to visit the tomb when the Sabbath is over. It is the women who tell the men to go back to Galilee. The women are the messengers. The writer of Matthew's gospel also gives women prominence in the genealogy at the start of the gospel, that traces the line from Jesus back to David and then back to Abraham. Both women and men have a full part in these stories and in spreading the Good News of God's love for us.

There are eleven male disciples remaining after Judas has left. For Matthew it isn't important to make the number back up to twelve, so his gospel has no story about appointing another disciple to take the place of Judas Iscariot. Eleven men, a small group, are enough to set the vision of the kingdom in motion.

Did you note in the reading that the disciples worshipped Jesus when he re-appeared to them, **but some doubted**. Not just doubting Thomas who we hear about in John's gospel, but maybe 3 or 4 others too! Don't be too quick to judge the disciples who weren't sure that they were seeing Jesus and whether or not they could do the things that he was asking of them. If we were there, that might have been our reaction too. And anyway, I think it is better, healthier, wiser even, to ask questions and be sure in your own mind that you are doing the right thing, before setting out on a new mission.

These men had left their businesses, work, maybe wives and families, and land, to follow Jesus up to now. And that hadn't worked out very well for them. Jesus hadn't defeated the Romans, hadn't overturned the Jewish political and economic authorities and powers that be, and hadn't made their lives any easier. The disciples and the rest of the un-named people in the group that had followed Jesus, were now at a turning point. They had to make a decision: go back and pick up their old lives as best they could, or persist in working towards Jesus' vision of a better world for all.

Go back or take a step forward in faith, to a hopeful, but uncertain future.

The Jewish community in Jesus' time had many laws and rules and regulations written down in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Also known as the law of Moses. These laws are summarised in the Ten Commandments, which still provide us with useful guidelines for living today. But for every rule there is always someone who wants to find a loophole, and so the regulators, mainly the priests, had to keep refining and clarifying the laws, down to the last detail. They ended up with many different rules about what sacrifices were required at the Temple and about what activities did and didn't constitute work on the Sabbath, and so on. I'm not entirely sure whether all Jewish people actually bothered to try to follow all

these rules in their day-to-day lives. We know that the Sadducees and Pharisees groups did try to live by the rules. Probably the rest of the Jewish community would follow them as best they could.

But the trouble with such detailed and nit-picking laws is that they become a burden and people lose sight of the intent of the original rules — how to live well, alongside others, in peaceful communities. Jesus was a back to basics sort of guy. He put people before rules. If someone is hungry on the Sabbath, then pluck that corn and feed them now. If he can heal someone with a withered arm now, even though it is the Sabbath, then how dare you make that person wait another day to be healed. How obscene to let his suffering continue another minute, just for the sake of a precious rule.

What do we think about the Bible now? What is our attitude to it?

Some Christians believe that every word in the Bible is literally true, factual and historically accurate. And furthermore, that if any part of the Bible is not true, then the whole foundation of their faith will be shaken. The Bible then becomes a rigid text, that can be interpreted in only one way. It becomes a weapon to beat those with different ideas into submission.

It will not surprise you to learn that is not my attitude to the Bible, and I don't recommend that you treat the Bible that way either.

The Bible is full of foundational stories and wisdom, about people relating to God and to each other. We can reach into the depths of this book and pull out treasure for our lives today. The issue is not whether a particular story in the Bible really happened the way it is written down, whether it is true in any absolute sense, but rather what value and encouragement can we take from it today? The Bible is a beautiful and powerful thing, which needs to be treated with respect.

Let's get back to those disciples on the mountain in Galilee. What does Jesus say to encourage and persuade them, to help them move through and beyond their doubts?

First: I make the rules now and I give you permission to act. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Don't look to your law books and scriptures, don't look to your Kings and priests, ignore the Romans – I, Jesus, have all the power you need. And I'm offering it to you. All you have to do is say, "Yes."

Second: What do I want you to do? “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, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Let's break that down. “Go.” Don't stay here in a pious huddle, take that first step, start your journey.

“Make disciples of all nations.” That means tell everyone you meet on your travels about the good news that God loves us and that there is a better way to live. But what if they already have a good, nurturing religion of their own? (I'll come back to that!)

“...baptizing them” Baptism was a serious and often dangerous commitment for a follower of Jesus to undertake in the first century. It required training over several months and was often performed at Easter. The Romans persecuted and attacked Christians, so worship was often held in secret, in private houses.

“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” Matthew's gospel was probably written down in the 80s of the first century – about 50 years after Jesus died. My theological reading suggests that the concept of the Trinity – Father, Son & Holy Spirit – probably wasn't known to Jesus, but was developed later by the early church. Jesus came to be known as Jesus the Messiah, or Jesus the Christ, but I think these are terms that were applied to him by his followers long after his death, as they struggled to come to terms with his crucifixion and started to build a new theology that would serve the developing Christian church. The Council of Nicea in the year 325 was still arguing over the fine points of how Jesus could be both human and also divine. Jesus key vision was always of a just society, where everyone had enough – of the kingdom of heaven, here on earth.

“and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” What did Jesus command his disciples to do? Actually, his instructions were quite simple: Love God, Love your neighbour, Love yourself. That is the sum total of Jesus' law. There are no loopholes to sneak out through. Either our lives meet these simple standards or they don't.

Third: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is harder to interpret. In what way was Jesus with the disciples after he died and rose? How is Jesus with us here today, how do we know? When does the age finish? Does it ever finish?

I find the usual descriptions of the Trinity, of God being Three in One, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a bit distant. The modern usage of Creator,

Redeemer and Enabler is more appealing, but I have come up with my own description.

Worship God, Follow Jesus, Spirit Filled.

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To me this has an implied movement, freedom of action and purpose. It is not a static theory.

We here this morning are worshipping God. (Remember, I'm just up here leading and guiding you, I am not the focus.) If we worship God, we are saved from worshipping possessions or worldly power. And God is found through the week in our everyday lives, in beautiful unexpected sights or interactions with other people. When we keep still and listen, God is with us.

I find it helpful to make a distinction between Jesus the man who was born and lived on this earth and died just like us, and Jesus the Messiah or Christ of faith. We can then focus on what the Bible tells us Jesus the man said and did, and try to do the same. We will fail as often as we succeed, but we need to keep doing and saying the things that Jesus' example showed us.

I see Spirit as Energy. The Spirit is that flash of inspiration and second wind that we get when we have run dry. Spirit is freedom. Spirit is power. Spirit is light and music. Spirit is the good in you and the good in me.

If we are filled with the Spirit, we also recognise the Spirit at work in other people. Pala explained to me recently that the greeting and action of Namaste [demonstrate] is more than just a polite greeting. It has a deeper spiritual significance and conveys the meaning: The Divine in me bows to the Divine in you. Isn't that beautiful! Namaste.

Some closing thoughts:

Step out in faith, encouraged by Jesus' message and example, and recognise the good in others.

Live well, alongside others, in peaceful communities

Good things come in threes.

Amen.

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