

Sermon for Trinity Sunday – The Revd Alice Ormondroyd, St Mary Abbots Church, Kensington

Readings:

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

A couple of months ago, a thoughtful member of this congregation sent me a card. Concerned that I might have been given the task, as new curate, of preaching on Trinity Sunday, the card offered some encouragement and some suggestions for how to approach unpacking this particular teaching of the church. I have to say I was deeply touched by this kind gesture, and indeed very impressed with the depth of theological insight that suggested that making sense of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit was not dissimilar to making sense of our own expressions of identity – in my case as a wife, mother and deacon.

In my experience, Trinity Sunday is one of those days where we can, both as preachers and hearers, get our theological knickers in a bit of a twist. Clearly we have an opportunity through our readings, to reflect on the biblical basis for our belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's very good to flex our theological muscles and press in deeper to the wider reflection of the church across the centuries on this particular doctrine. It is good also to engage in a certain amount of wrestling about who or what God is, or isn't, before settling into a conclusion of the ultimate mystery of God. And yet, all of this endeavour is fruitless unless it actually makes a difference to our lives as disciples of Christ. As the 20th century Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner put it, we need to think about both the immanent Trinity – who God is in and of himself, and also the economic Trinity – how God works out his saving purposes in the world. It is not simply knowledge of who God that matters, it is the work of God that changes us, the encounter with the living God that transforms our lives, that brings healing and hope and a desire to serve.

This struck me most clearly when looking at the readings for this week. Each depicts an encounter with the living God which is so utterly life changing that whatever confessional statements are uttered I think say far less about the nature of God, and far more about the impact that encounter with God has. Today I think is not a day not just for deep theological probing, but rather a day of celebration for all that God has done and is doing in our lives, and for the way in which our knowledge and encounter with Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is bringing transformation to our lives, and through us to the world we live in.

I find our reading from Isaiah unspeakably moving, as he describes his vision of God, surrounded by the angels singing 'Holy Holy Holy'. It's the same hymn of praise that we have in our Eucharistic prayer, and I once heard Rowan Williams describing it as the moment in our worship when the heavens part and suddenly our worship in this time and place is united with all the host of heaven, who sing this song all day, everyday, for all eternity. So struck is Isaiah by this vision that he is immediately convicted of his sin, of his unworthiness, of his utter inadequacy before God. And yet one seraph comes to him, touches his lips in this extraordinary act of decisive intimacy, telling him that he is forgiven. This is a vision of the God who hears and responds, a vision of drama and ecstasy, a vision of sorrow and of thanksgiving. And it's no surprise then that Isaiah, when he hears the voice of God saying 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us', immediately seeks to respond, to offer up his life in thanksgiving to the God who has reached out with such compassion and love. How many

of us I wonder, have encountered a similar sense of the majesty of God over this time of global crisis. A sense of our insignificance, and yet a sense of God's deep, deep compassion for us and for our needs. I have no doubt that the innumerable acts of selfless heroism have been motivated by a desire to give something back, to love others in the way that we have known ourselves to be loved by God. I wonder how your encounter with the living God has inspired you to step out in love and service, what sort of stirrings might be going on, what promptings might be calling you to stand up and say, 'here I am, send me'?

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, we find this same passion, the writing of one who after encounter with the living God is living the redeemed, transformed life. Paul, who of all people, had the most dramatic of conversion experiences, a blinding vision of Christ that brought him, just like Isaiah, to a place of confession, is able therefore to articulate his understanding of the nature of God through his experience of God's saving action in his life. For Paul, the essential truth that we are children of God, a phrase which he repeats again and again, is our window into the Godhead. In Paul's theology it is the Holy Spirit which reveals to us God as Father, which enables us to cry 'Abba, Father', and which enables us to recognise our invitation to live on earth as disciples of Christ, ready to suffer as he did, and then to share in his glory in the eternal kingdom. This theology might feel a bit rough and ready, a bit muddled, a far cry from the polished confession that we say each week in our Creed, but I like Paul's freshness, and I suppose his theology is raw precisely because he is working it out as he goes along, by working backwards from his encounter with the living God, to make pronouncements on the nature of God. It's an encouragement I think for us to remember that theologians are not just simply those with academic qualifications and a number of books to their name. People qualified to teach us about God are primarily those who the Spirit of God has called and whose hearts have been opened and enlarged such that they too can cry 'Abba, Father'. Can we notice who God is speaking through in our own lives? Perhaps it is children that we know, perhaps it is the stranger, the unexpected conversation in a shop or park or café. What revelations about the nature of God might we hear through the testimonies of those around us and their encounters with the living God?

Finally we are presented today with Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. A man, who seeks Jesus out under the cover of darkness. A man who knows God but can't make sense of Jesus. A man hungry for truth, and fullness of life. A man of questions who finds in Jesus one with the intellectual capacity to explain to him something of the necessity of God's intervention in sending his Son into the world. We sadly know nothing more about Nicodemus, about how his encounter with Jesus changed him, but I think he offers to us again both an encouragement and a challenge. An encouragement to seek Christ, to ask difficult questions of Scripture and doctrine, to hunger for truth. And a challenge to recognise that humility of our life long journey of understanding God. Nicodemus may be a grown man, a leader indeed of the Jews, and yet he recognises that there is more to learn, more to discover, more of God to encounter. I wonder if today we too need to hear that humble challenge, to remember that there is always more of God to know and encounter, and to be excited about the adventure of faith that lies ahead of us?

Because the God that revealed himself to Isaiah, and to Paul, and to Nicodemus, reveals himself also to each of us. This is the same God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose praise we sing each week, whose presence we know in our lives, and to whom we entrust our prayers

for His creation. May we be encouraged today to seek encounter with Him, to respond in acts of loving service, and to look forward in eager anticipation to the journey of faith that leads us ever deeper into the heart of the one, true, God.

Amen.