

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 30th MAY 2021
TRINITY SUNDAY

INTRODUCTION

One of the "silver linings" to come out of the Lockdown has been the renewed sense of community which so many have noticed and applauded. And yet, you only need to scan the daily News - the conflict in Jerusalem, and the anniversary of the tragic death in the USA of George Floyd to name but two items – to be reminded how deep some divisions in society run.

The Doctrine of the Trinity which we celebrate today – "One God in Three Persons" – is hard, perhaps impossible, to understand with our intellects. But it reminds us that at the very heart of God there is both difference and community – relationships of love which overflow to the whole world. All of us are different, too; but we are drawn and bound together by something far deeper and more powerful than race, or interests, or even creed. We are bound together by the love of God for each and every one of us.

Take a moment now to rest in that love and the deep community it brings.

OPENING BIBLE VERSE AND PRAYER

"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs also - heirs

of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

(Romans 8:16-17)

**O God, you are at the heart of Creation.
Your word brings life into being;
your peace gives living its fulfilment;
your Spirit unites us into your Son.
We draw near, seeking your love in our hearts;
your wisdom in our minds; your power in our lives.
Receive us with grace, in the name of your Son. Amen**
THE LORD IS KING FOREVER

Honour the LORD, you heavenly beings;

honour the LORD for his glory and strength.

Honour the LORD for the glory of his name.

Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

The voice of the LORD echoes above the sea.

The God of glory thunders.

The LORD thunders over the mighty sea.

**The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.**

The voice of the LORD splits the mighty cedars;
the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon.

**The voice of the LORD twists mighty oaks
and strips the forests bare.**

In his Temple everyone shouts, "Glory!"

The LORD rules over the floodwaters.

The LORD reigns as king forever.

The LORD gives his people strength.

The LORD blesses them with peace.

Psalm 29

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Light of Christ, shine into our hearts.

Shine into the dark places of hurt and pain.

Shine into the dark places of sadness and regret.

Light of Christ, shine into our hearts.

You are the never-ceasing gift of love;

Yet we treat love as a scarce commodity.

Lord, have mercy

Lord, have mercy.

You call us to share in your abundant life;

Yet we think we are not worthy.

Christ, have mercy

Christ, have mercy.

You come to us in the vulnerability of the Word made flesh;

Yet we still put celebrity and power on a pedestal.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love and power

Forgive us and free us from our sins,

Heal and strengthen us by His Spirit,

And raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT READING (Isaiah 6:1-8)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is

blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

SPIRIT OF HOLINESS...

*Spirit of holiness, wisdom and faithfulness,
wind of the Lord, blowing strongly and free:
strength of our serving and joy of our worshipping
Spirit of God, bring your fullness to me!*

You came to interpret and teach us effectively
all that the Saviour has spoken and done;
to glorify Jesus is all your activity
promise and gift of the Father and Son:
Spirit of holiness...

You came with your gifts to supply all our poverty,
pouring your love on the church in her need;
you came with your fruit for our growth to maturity,
richly refreshing the souls that you feed:
Spirit of holiness...

GOSPEL READING (John 3:1-17)

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.
Glory to you, O Lord.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION *(by Lindsey Coulthard)*

Following on the heels of Pentecost last week, our focus today is the Holy Trinity.....a day that some, if not many would prefer not to preach on! What can I say that is meaningful, about such an abstract concept? And yet we speak of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit so frequently; when we pray, when we sing and every time we break bread together. The transcendent God who brought this world into existence, the God who became incarnate and redeemed the world in and through Jesus, and the God who is present in history and experience - who we encounter through the Holy Spirit, are all one and the same God.

The theologians of the early church gave careful thought to formulating a properly Christian doctrine of God. They wanted it to be simple, but they also wanted it to be authentic and

reliable. And oh my – were there some disagreements; I expect you'll have heard many explanations of the Trinity over the years. Some better or more accessible than others.....

It was Thomas Aquinas who said that it was much easier to say what God was not rather than what he is. In other words, every positive statement we make about God has to be immediately denied or qualified. If we say that God is 'good', it is obviously true but our concept of 'goodness' is so limited, that God's 'goodness' cannot be remotely described by our concept of it. The same could be said of every other attribute we might apply to God.

When it comes to speaking about the meaning and inner relationship of the Holy Trinity – the three 'persons' in one God, we find ourselves using ordinary human language – because that is what we have at our disposal. But we soon discover that human language is totally inadequate when we try to express the reality of this. Allow me to give you a visual demonstration.....

Imagine something as wide, or billowing or vast as you possibly can. Let's just say the sea for example. Now picture yourself on the seashore with a tea cup, trying to put all the water you can see inside this little receptacle you're holding. Or how about this – reams and reams of net that make up the many layers of a netted undershirt. Now imagine trying to squeeze it all into a tiny little bag. No matter how hard we try

we can't reduce the sea into a tea cup and we simply can't pack the underskirt into a tiny gift bag. Thankfully, we are not alone! We only have to look to our readings today to see what a challenge it can be to describe or understand the awesome nature and being of our God – in human words.

In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah uses visionary language to try and describe God – he tells us 'the hem (or train) of his robe filled the temple'. What a fabulous image! Kings at the time of Isaiah would have worn robes with long trains because they were difficult to manoeuvre in. Wearing a long train meant you were important enough that you didn't have to work. By using this image, Isaiah is telling us that God is highly honoured and dignified. Imagine the entire place, here at St. Stephen's filled with just the hem of God's robe. Or how about the cathedral? You get the idea.....

Isaiah hints at the Trinity in his vision, and some of you may want to challenge me here. How can we apply New Testament theology to Hebrew scriptures – chronologically it doesn't work; but let's not forget that the Trinity has always been (think of the creation story and the spirit of God hovering over the waters.) Isaiah describes the seraphs singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy' three times - a reference perhaps to the three persons of the Trinity. And when God wonders what prophet he should send – he doesn't ask 'who will go for me' rather he says, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'

American author and poet Michael Coffey was so taken with Isaiah's vision that he was inspired to write a poem entitled 'God's Bathrobe', it's like a modern day version of Isaiah's vision. It is however too long for me to read all the way through, so I'm just going to share a short section with you now....

*God sat in her deck chair
reading the Sunday Times and sipping strawberry lemonade her
pink robe flowing down to the ground*

*the garment hem was fluff and frill
and it spilled holiness down into the sanctuary
into the cup and the nostrils of the singing people*

*one silky string wove its way through Jesus' cross
and tied itself to desert-parched immigrants with swollen
tongues
and a woman with cancer and two young sons*

*you won't believe this, but a single hair-thin fibre
floated onto the yacht of a rich man and he gasped
when he saw everything as it really was*

*the hem fell to and fro across the universe
filling space and time and gaps between the sub-atomic world
with the effervescent presence of the one who is the is*

*and even as we monotheise and trinitise
and speculate and doubt even our doubting
the threads of holiness trickle into our lives*

*and the seraphim keep singing "holy, holy, holy"
and flapping their wings like baby birds
and God says: rest a while.....*

In our Gospel reading, Nicodemus, a respected and intelligent teacher of the law just cannot understand what Jesus means when he says that 'no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above'. He asks a number of questions for clarity, and Jesus playfully mocks him saying – 'are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?' Even as the conversation ends, it's still not clear whether Nicodemus has understood what Jesus is saying to him. Jesus is using symbolic, spiritual language whereas Nicodemus hears the plain, literal meaning - he sees birth as 'of the flesh' but Jesus is speaking of spiritual reality. 'What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit'; rebirth – or being born again is a spiritual experience. Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus.

As I was preparing this reflection I was reminded of something that was said following our Thursday morning Communion service a couple of weeks ago. After our service had finished Leon (*permission granted to share*) said, 'It's all well and good

having communion via Zoom, but I'm missing the bread and wine. I'm missing the experience of it.' Over the past 14 months many of us have missed out on significant experiences but as Leon spoke I had a Kairos moment. Yes we have missed out, and I for one missed the bread and wine dreadfully in the early days of lockdown. I felt spiritually adrift, separated somehow; something that many of us will no doubt be able to identify with. But then I realised that when we pray, we experience the Trinity in a deeply spiritual way.

C.S. Lewis gives a readily accessible vision of such encounter in the following words. He writes: 'Imagine an ordinary simple Christian kneeling down to pray. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which [the Christian] is praying – the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on – the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed towards that goal. So that the threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kinds of life – the spiritual life. He is being pulled into God by God, while still remaining himself.'

This Trinity Sunday, let Holy, Holy, Holy, be your song. Rest a while, and allow yourself to be pulled into God by God, in prayer.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

In response to what we have heard, we affirm our trust and faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

Called by the great God we worship,
Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

We bring before you the needs of the Church,

In its weakness and in its potential;
Revive and refresh us, teach and direct us,
Inspire all who teach, preach, and simply talk about the good
news,
And uphold all those who suffer for their faith in any way.

Silence

God of mystery and compassion:
You know us and you love us.

We bring before you
The particular problems of these times in which we are living;
Renew in us a commitment to community and mutual trust,
Give a profound sense of value to all who feel despised and
excluded;
Protect the vulnerable
And where we feel overwhelmed by the suffering around us,
give us hearts to feel your compassion.

Silence

God of mystery and compassion:
You know us and you love us.

We bring before you

The nurturing of our children and young people,
In homes and parenting, schools and teaching,
In the expectations, pressures and dangers,
In the hopes and possibilities for good.

Silence

God of mystery and compassion:
You know us and you love us.

We bring before you, O God,
The hungry and malnourished,
The greedy and complacent;
Those who are ill and those who care for them;
The unhappy and those who comfort them;
All who are waiting for surgery;
And all who have no one to turn to.
From our own church community we pray especially for:
Paul Burston, David New, Michael Fussell, Anna Clements and
Adrina and Alan Price.
And we take a few moments to remember before God others
who are struggling with illness – those we know, and those we
don't.

Silence

God of mystery and compassion:
You know us and you love us.

Living God, we remember those who have died
And pray for them now.
Lead them into the light of eternity,
And keep us all in the Way that leads us
To share your everlasting life.
Among those whose anniversaries fall at this time, we
remember Hartley Brown, Ann Jarett, Johanna Anwyl-Hughes,
Wendy Anwyl-Hughes, Jill Scholes, Hilda Stewart, Rowland Hill,
and Freda Hemmings. We remember, too, the victims of
Coronavirus, and the medical staff who have given their lives
in service of others.

Silence

God of mystery and compassion:
You know us and you love us.

We bring before you, O God,
Our lives and all that we are,
Including our successes and our failures;
We thank you for the gift of life
And ask that we may get to know you more deeply
Day after day.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

HYMN FOR REFLECTION....

Father of Heaven, Whose Love profound
A ransom for our souls hath found,
Before Your Throne we humbly bend,
To us Your pardoning Love extend.

Almighty Son, Incarnate Word,
Our Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord;
Before Your Throne we humbly bend,
To us Your saving Grace extend.

Eternal Spirit, by Whose Breath
The soul is raised from sin and death;
Before Your Throne we humbly bend,
To us Your quickening Power extend.

Thrice Holy! Father, Spirit, Son;
Mysterious Godhead, Three in One,
Before Your Throne we humbly bend,
Grace, Pardon, Life, to all extend. Amen.

ENDING

**May the Father in his all-embracing love accept us for who
we are.
May the incarnate Word touch and hold us in the days
ahead.**

May the Spirit's promptings lead us to risk ourselves for love.

And may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Be with us all, now and evermore.

Amen.

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Prayers – amended, from Susan Sayers, Living Stones

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