

Sermon

Sunday 7th June, 2009

Lessons

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8

Romans 8: 12 – 17

St John 3: 1 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who has taught us that not the hearers of Your Word, but the doers, are justified in Your sight; grant to us that all our thoughts, words and acts in private and public, may henceforward be more in harmony with Your gracious will; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the day in the Church's liturgical calendar when we are invited to reflect upon the doctrine of the Trinity. Let me be clear what we are talking about and if you get this, you get the point. The Trinity is described, classically, in the Creed of St Athanasius:

The Catholic [or Universal] faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory is equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Clear?! Athanasius was a theologian and Bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century. He was described by Julian the 'Apostate' as 'this troublesome bit of a man.' Troublesome or not, it is St Athanasius who begins to conceptualise and articulate God as One God, but Three Persons. The German poet, Heinrich Heine, once stood with a friend in front of the cathedral at Amiens in France. His friend asked, 'Tell me, Heinrich, why can't we build cathedrals like this anymore?' Heinrich answered, 'Because in those days people had

convictions, and today all we have are opinions, and it takes more than opinions to build a cathedral.’ The hearts and imagination of the early Christians were set on fire by much more than opinions about God. Their lives were animated and agitated by the conviction that ‘God was intensely real to them in the heat of their own experience.’ Above all else, above all other claims upon their time, loyalty and resources, they burned with the conviction that God mattered. Reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity, the scholar Leonard Hodgson said, ‘What must the truth be now if people who thought as the biblical writers did, put it like that.’

From our readings this morning, let me pull out a selection of verses. From Book of Isaiah, we hear the words of the prophet:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above, it stood seraphim; each one had six wings...And one cried to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!’

From the Gospel of St John, we read the words of Jesus:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And, finally, from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans, we read:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live....The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...

I have offered you a selection of verses from the Old Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles and we have heard of the Holy One, and the only begotten Son and the Spirit who bears witness: the Scripture is the soil out of which the doctrine of the triune God has grown. John Shelby Spong has said:

I don't think that God is a Trinity because I can't tell you what God is like. I can tell you that I have experienced God as 'Infinite Other,' and that's what Father means. I have experienced God as the depth within, and that's what 'Spirit' means. And I have experienced God incarnate in human life and most particularly in the life of the one I call 'my Lord,' and so I experience God in these three ways, and I say to myself that the only way I can make sense of that is to say that I am a Trinitarian, but I don't think that is what God is like, and I'm not going to tell anyone that I've captured God in the formulas of my faith. I think the Church must play loose with its dogmas and its doctrines.

The Scripture is the soil out of which the doctrine of the Trinity has grown but Scripture itself is a written account of human experience, reflection and interaction with God. Rooted in the experience, reflections and interaction of thousands of years, the Church wishes to say of God that He is holy, that He is Other, that He is Infinite. Plato said, 'God can in no way be described.'

Master Eckhart wrote of God, 'He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that.

If you think of anything he might be, he is not that.' Gregory of Nyssa said that

God is invisible and dwells beyond all knowledge, beyond all that we can see:

we are separated from God by the darkness of incomprehensibility. In the

words of the Hebrew prophet, God is holy and sits on a throne, high and lifted

up, the train of His robe filled the temple and the seraphim, the highest order of

celestial being, covered their faces. God is holy, Other, Infinite: God in

Himself cannot be known. Intellectually, philosophically, and rightly, the Church does not want to depart from this.

But, for the Church, the Holy One, the One who sits on the Throne, is not an adequate expression of our experience of God and our thinking about Him.

The God of the Bible is not a self-contained God. In the words of the theologian Maurice Wiles:

He is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob; he is the God of the biblical story and it is there that we can learn the meaning of the word, there that we can read his character. He calls Abraham to follow him and be the father of a special people; he calls Moses to rescue that people from slavery in Egypt and lead them to their own promised land. He is as God with a purpose in history, who is grieved by the failures of his people to live up to that purpose but never abandons them. He continues to pursue his purpose through acts of mercy and of judgement, until its culmination in the coming of his Son, his supreme act of mercy and judgement in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Throughout biblical history, it seems as though God has always been involved in human history, that, in a sense, our history is part of God's personal history.

We are intimately bound together. The fourth evangelist has Jesus say, 'For

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever

believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' God's

involvement in human history is supremely expressed – can we believe it,

manifested and incarnated – in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. There can be little

doubt that many who met Jesus and many who later heard about Him came to

believe that God was in Christ. For thousand years men and women have been

testifying to that reality and have been living that conviction. James S Stewart wrote:

Let any Christian think of going out into the world with the ultimate loneliness of his spirit for ever vanquished because Christ is with him; of facing life in the assurance that henceforth not for a moment does he walk unaided and alone!

Think of the inner peace it would mean – its effect on frayed nerves and harassed brain and daunted spirit. We are apt in these days to be besieged by life's unbearable enigmas and battered by its frightening responsibilities....We tell ourselves it is absurd that we should even attempt to be Christ's witnesses in a world like this and with a nature like our own....And then across our hectic fever falls the voice of calm: 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end'; and we know that, whatever happens, He is quite certain to be there.

This is the way to peace, and to the consciousness of adequate resources. For it is no weak Christ with whom we have to do, but a Christ of power – stronger than the stress of life, stronger than the tyrant sins that seek to smash us, stronger in the end than death itself.

For two thousand years, men and women have felt the peace that Jesus gives, have felt drawn to God through Jesus of Nazareth and, like the disciple Thomas and Bishop John Shelby Spong, have called him 'Lord.'

The theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, was a German soldier and POW in World War II. Moltmann draws us into the implications of what it means to speak of God as Trinity, if that concept is to have integrity. Writing of the crucifixion, Moltmann states:

The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The

Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.

In other words, the torture, brutality and death of the Son is experienced in the heart of the Eternal God, and experienced eternally. Applying this theological insight, Moltmann states:

A shattering expression of the [theology of the cross] which is suggested in the rabbinic theology of God's humiliation of himself is to be found in *Night*, a book written by E. Weisel, a survivor of Auschwitz: 'The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is He?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging on the gallows..."'

Moltmann adds:

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.

The Church rightly wishes to hold on to the belief that God is Holy, Other and Infinite before Whom the seraphim hide their faces but Moltmann has a point. Not only is biblical history the story of God's involvement in human history but in Jesus, God's Son, the Word made flesh, God Himself is captured and brutally murdered. It is the Incarnation, God's *personal* involvement in the world, which confirms for us that we matter, and matter ultimately, to God. If He is

not involved, if He does not suffer, then we are nothing to Him, He dwells in nothingness and, morally, He is a demon.

We matter and matter ultimately. St Paul describes us as the children of God, heirs of God. He wrote, 'We are God's children, and if children, then heirs.' Martin Luther said of this verse, 'It were good that this text were written in letters of gold, so admirable is it, and so full of comfort.' Karl Barth call this verse the 'song of the redeemed.' Children and heirs of God. We can talk about our inheritance as a nation, as a family or as individuals. Inheritance is a complex matter. 'We inherit the bad along with the good, the responsibility along with the privilege, the shame along with the pride.' But, as Christians, we are heirs of the Kingdom of God. Fleming Rutledge wrote:

It makes a difference to know that. People who have an inheritance can be more free, more confident, more secure. I want to behave like a fellow-heir of Christ, not like a fearful, temporizing, guilt-ridden weakling, afraid of what may happen tomorrow, hedged in by 'buts' and 'ifs'..... poor of spirit and poor of soul. I don't have to be like that; I am an heir of God!

It is the Spirit, says St Paul, Who gives us that assurance and confidence. We are children of God: a text, said Luther, that should be written in gold letters.

It is the Spirit that enables us to live with the freedom, confidence and security of people who know that they have a priceless inheritance.

It is not for nothing that the Church has held on to the doctrine of the Trinity for over sixteen hundred years. It continues to yield fruit for us.

Amen.