

SermonSunday 18th May, 2008
Trinity Sunday

Lessons Genesis 1: 1 – 2: 4a 2 Corinthians 13: 11 – 13 St Matthew 28: 16 – 20

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray You, to be grounded and settled in the pursuit of truth, by the coming down of Your Holy Spirit into our hearts. That which we know not, do You reveal; that which is wanting in us, do You fill up; that which we know, do You confirm: and keep us blameless in Your service; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*Genesis 1: 1*

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's ninety-nine year old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. 'So tell me,' he pleaded, 'was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?' 'No,' answered the old rabbi. 'Ah,' responded the younger man, 'Then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?' 'No,' answered the old rabbi. 'Well,' the young rabbi responded, 'what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.' 'Ah,' said the old man, 'that was the tradition.' There has never been agreement in the Church about the form and content of worship. There has always been a breadth of opinion. I think you and I know that! If that is true of worship, then it is equally true of doctrine. Today is Trinity Sunday. Of all the days in the Christian calendar, it is today that we reflect specifically on the doctrine of the Trinity: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The word 'Trinity' does not appear in the Bible. The doctrine evolved over hundreds of years and it is not until the late fourth century and the persuasion of the Cappadocian Fathers at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople that the doctrine became orthodoxy. Based on Scripture, God was to be understood as One, though He is encountered in three ways. God is not three gods; He is

not divided. We experience and therefore conceptualise God as Father the Creator, Son the Redeemer and the Spirit who fills us with the life of God. Does this doctrinal debate set you on fire? It did those in the fourth century. Writing on the unending theological discussions, Gregory of Nyssa said:

The whole city is full of it, the squares, the market places, the cross-roads, the alley-ways; old-clothesmen, money changers, food sellers – they are all busy arguing. If you ask someone to give you change, they philosophise about the Begotten; if you inquire about the price of bread, you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater and the Son inferior; if you ask whether your bath is ready, the attendant answers that the Son was made out of nothing.

The Trinity is a theological and philosophical concept to help us think about God. There is a breadth of opinion on this doctrine. The status of the Holy Spirit within the concept of the Trinity remains a theological difference between the churches of the West and the Orthodox churches of the East. In the East the belief was and is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. In the West, the belief grew that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, not through the Son. That minor semantic difference contributed to the breach between Rome and Constantinople in 1054 and remains a source of difference and division between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the churches of the West. The Trinity is a theological and philosophical concept to help us think about God.

One of the most important things, if not the most important thing, we can say about God is that He is hidden and incomprehensible. The Emperor Hadrian said to Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya, ‘I desire to behold your God.’ ‘That is an impossibility,’ replied the Rabbi. The emperor persisted; so the Rabbi asked him to face the sun; it was the summer solstice. Rabbi Joshua said, ‘Gaze at that.’ ‘I cannot,’ he answered. The Rabbi said, ‘You admit that you are unable to look at the sun, which is only one of the attendants upon the Holy One, blessed be He; how much more beyond your power must it be to look at God Himself!’ Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

The true knowledge and vision of God consists in this: in seeing that God is invisible, because what we see lies beyond all knowledge, being wholly separated by the darkness of incomprehensibility.....The closer one approaches the vision of God, the more one recognises the invisible character of the divine nature.

The opening verse of the Book of Genesis reads, ‘In the beginning God...’ In other words, ‘In the beginning the Divine Being...’ We cannot look at Him; He is beyond our vision. We may say of Him that He created the heaven and the earth, but He remains in darkness. The hymn of Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander, *All things bright and beautiful*, is only half the story. Mrs Frances wrote:

Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colours,
He made their tiny wings.

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.

There is an alternative version to this hymn, the verses of which could be added for theological completeness. This version is called *All things dull and ugly*:

All things dull and ugly,
All creatures short and squat,
All things rude and nasty,
The Lord God made the lot.

Each little snake that poisons,
Each little wasp that stings,
He made their brutish venom,
He made their horrid wings.

All things sick and cancerous,
All evil great and small,
All things foul and dangerous,
The Lord God made them all.

Each nasty little hornet,
Each beastly little squid,
who made the spiky urchin?
Who made the sharks? He did!

All things scant and ulcerous,
All pox both great and small,
Putrid, foul and gangrenous,
The Lord God made them all.

These verses are very amusing, but they make an important theological point. With contentment we read, ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’ Joyfully, we sing, ‘Each little flower that opens, Each little bird that sings,’ but it is the same God who makes tectonic plates which collide

and cyclones which travel at speeds of over one hundred miles per hour. On Wednesday an article in *The Times* began:

On the sports ground where Gao Jiali once played basketball, her body lay under a quilt, her mother mourning beside her. Incense sticks and two red Buddhist candles flickered by her white-stockinged feet.

The fifteen year old was one of several hundred children killed when the Juyuan middle school crumbled under the force of the magnitude 7.9 earthquake that rocked China on Monday. Her young cousin watched as the weeping mother and a relative slipped a pair of clean trousers over Gao Jiali's limp legs to make sure she would make her last journey in new clothes.

The girl looked as if she had merely fallen asleep. 'She didn't have to die,' he cousin said. 'She has no injuries, she wasn't crushed. She must have been alive inside for a long time. In the end she suffocated.'

There has been some anger directed at the government because of the quality of the buildings. What of the Builder who made the tectonic plates? I understand the science and the geological need to allow the earth's surface to move, but I do not understand the suffering. In 2005, nearly 80,000 people died when an earthquake rocked Kashmir in Pakistan. In 2004, the tsunami killed 230,000 people across Asia. In 1991, a tropical cyclone hit Bangladesh killing 140,000. In 1976, 240,000 were killed following an earthquake in China and in 1970 the deadliest cyclone in history hit East Pakistan, today's Bangladesh, killing half a million people. 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' At the back of my mind, I hear God say to Job, 'Who are you to question me?' But there is a greater theological maturity to that honest questioning than to shouts of miracle when some survivor is pulled from the rubble. It is not good theology to say that God allows earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis and then pulls a handful of survivors from the wreckage. I am with the Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nyssa: 'God lies within the darkness of incomprehensibility.'

If what I have said is true of God the Creator, the Father, then what can we say of the Son? Thomas á Kempis in the fifteen century wrote of Jesus as a friend. He lived in a community in the Netherlands. He was influenced by the 'new devotion', a spirituality which sought to return to the fervour of the first Christians. In his book, *The Imitation of Christ*, he concentrates on the closeness of Jesus. In John Wesley's translation, Kempis wrote:

When Jesus is present, all is well, and nothing seemeth difficult; but when Jesus is absent, everything is hard. When Jesus speaketh not inwardly, we have no true comfort; but if Jesus speak but one word, we feel much consolation. Did not Mary presently rise from the place where she wept, when Martha said unto her, 'The Master is come, and calleth for thee?' Happy the hour when Jesus calleth from tears to spiritual joy....To be without Jesus is a grievous hell, and to be with Jesus a sweet paradise. If Jesus be with thee, no enemy can hurt thee. He that findeth Jesus, findeth a good treasure, yea a good above all goods: And he that loseth Jesus, loseth too much, and much more than the whole world.

In the Orthodox tradition and elsewhere the Jesus prayer is practised. 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.' It is a prayer, a vow and a confession of faith. It brings the Lord Jesus into our consciousness. Practice of the prayer is simple: we stand before the Lord with the attention of the heart, and call on Him: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.' The essential part of this is not the words, but in the faith, contrition and self-surrender to the Lord. We think of God in Trinity because we can experience Him through meditation on the life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus. It is part of the mystery and paradox of faith that the God who dwells in the darkness of incomprehensibility can be felt, can burn within the hearts of His followers, in and through Jesus. But even here, even in Jesus, we dare not get all mushy and let go of our theological maturity. Of Jesus and the Cross, Bonhoeffer said, 'Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world...' Perhaps the most important image of Jesus in understanding God's relationship with the world is the crucifixion of Jesus. God lets Himself be pushed out: no supernatural miracle in China, Burma or on the cross at Calvary.

And, finally, the Spirit. I remember visiting a lady in the Marie Curie Hospice some years ago. She had only a day or so to live. Her daughter was with her. I knelt down at the side of the bed so that I was at the right eye level. I read the twenty-third psalm and we prayed together:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
and thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me.

There was a poignancy, a depth and a mystical sense of the Presence of God in the togetherness, in the prayer and, most importantly, in the reading of Scripture. Death, darkness, the abyss, was so close and so too it seemed was the Shepherd with His rod and staff. We worship a mysterious God and the doctrine of the Trinity is a helpful tool.

Amen.