

30 May 2021: Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6: 1-8; John 3: 1-17

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'All talk of God is hazardous' - John Webster

Introduction: The Strangest Sunday?

Trinity is surely the strangest Sunday in the christian calendar. The service proceeds as normal but when the time comes for the sermon it is as if there is an unspoken agreement between preacher and congregation. Preachers preach to the best of their ability, congregations listen as attentively as they can but at the end everyone agrees that the subject for the day is an incomprehensible mystery.

And, of course, that is exactly as it should be. If it were ever possible to preach or to hear a completely comprehensible sermon about the Trinity, one of two things would have happened. Either the congregation would have been transported to heaven, or heaven would have come down to the congregation. Recognition of this fact may help to dissolve that sense of unease which seems to be inescapable on this Sunday.

Here are a couple of hymn verses to put us in the right context - worship.

NEH 145 (part) Tune: Old 100th ('All People that on Earth do Dwell')

1. All hail, adorèd Trinity;
All praise, eternal Unity:
O God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, ever one.

3. O Trinity, O Unity,
Be present as we worship thee;
And to the angels' songs in light
Our prayers and praises now unite.

From the Latin 'Ave Colenda Trinitas' translated by John Chambers (1805-93)

Preparation: Our Lord's Summary of the Law

'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord'. This is the fundamental verse for any attempts to worship or to understand the Trinity. After his resurrection, the disciples began to worship Jesus. And after Pentecost the disciples began to worship the Holy Spirit. 'Began' is perhaps too weak an expression; 'were compelled' might be better.

Jewish people could only worship God. Jewish people could only worship one God. And so the God of the disciples had to be a three-in-one God even if they hadn't the technical vocabulary as is used in the Nicene Creed.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 6: 1-8: A Threefold Pattern?

Vision - *'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne'* (6:1)

Confession - *'I am a man of unclean lips'* (6:5)

Absolution - *'...your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out'* (6:8)

BCP service of Holy Communion: A Corresponding Pattern?

Vision - *'Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins.'*

Confession - *'...we acknowledge and bewail.'*

Absolution - *'...pardon and deliver you from all your sins.'*

Now it might be said that we can always find such patterns if we look hard enough - but that is precisely the point. It is easy to say that the Trinity is a revealed truth - something we couldn't make up by ourselves - but any revealed truth has to have a point of contact with us otherwise we couldn't make any sense of it at all. Here is a far reaching comparison. When Indian Christians wanted to write about the Trinity, they had to use concepts from their own culture. They adapted a compound Sanskrit word made of three separate words. That they could do this quite naturally suggests that the idea of 'threeness' in relation to God may not be as strange as might appear.

But as today we must attempt to talk about God, where might we start? Let's begin with this:

God is Absolute Perfect Happiness

Absolute - unlimited. Perfect - without trace of selfishness. How do we know this? We know this by a process of 'reverse argument'.

- The ultimate goal of the christian life is happiness in heaven.
- All states of heavenly existence must be related to or derived from God.
- And so God must be absolute perfect happiness.

And because God's happiness is perfect it cannot remain self-contained but has to flow out wider and wider in over-abundance.

A Threefold Drama

The christian life can be described as a threefold drama ever moving in faith and obedience towards a happy ending: God the Father writes the play; God the Son acts out the play; God the Holy Spirit directs the performance.

The Drama in John's Gospel

Today's gospel reading is the well-known story of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Right at the end of the passage we have a verse which seems to tell us something about the Trinity: *'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.'* (v17).

And to this verse we can add another from elsewhere in John's gospel: *'And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever.'* (14:16 - KJV)

How do these verses speak about the Trinity? Borrowing some words from a great Old Testament source of wisdom *'These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways and*

how small a whisper they seem. (Job 26:14). Yes, indeed, but small voices that bring comfort and refreshment to ‘all that travail and are heavy laden’.

The Trinity: ‘Best of All is God with Us’

- We encounter God and God encounters us.
- We move out of shadows and images into the truth.
- We speak to the heart of God and the heart of God speaks to us.

Let’s end with some verses from a joyful hymn to the Trinity.

NEH 148 (part) ‘The God of Abraham Praise Tune: Leoni	
1. The God of Abraham praise Who reigns enthroned above, Ancient of everlasting days, And God of love: To him uplift your voice, At whose supreme command From earth we rise and seek the joys At his right hand.	8. The whole triumphant host Give thanks to God on high: 'Hail, Father, Son and Holy Ghost' They ever cry: Hail, Abraham's God and mine! (I join the heavenly lays) All might and majesty are thine, And endless praise.
Thomas Olivers (1725-99) based on the Hebrew Yigdal	

Almighty and eternal God,
who hast revealed thyself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit
and dost ever live and reign in the perfect unity of love:
hold us firm in this faith,
that we may know thee in all thy ways
and evermore rejoice in thy eternal glory;
who art three Persons yet one God,
now and for ever. **AMEN**