

Trinity Sunday
7/6/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 53:4-6

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

God in three persons

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lockdown has meant getting into overfull cupboards and sorting old notes and memorabilia. Here is one incident I recalled from 35 years ago, or more.

A professional lady of middle years, who had broken with her family and rejected her faith was telling me all the things that were wrong with her parents. Suddenly she stopped, and asked, "What do you think of my mother?" In retrospect, I see that question as a significant step. She had been constructing a world out of her own prejudice and her own resources. Now she was opening herself to something other, another perspective. Let us speculate that she saw me as God's representative. That would mean that she was wanting the heavenly parent she thought she didn't believe in to make comment on the relationship with her earthly parent which had caused her much suffering.

Caught on the hop I said the first words that came into my head; "I see your mother as a person who, in the midst of her own pain, has the capacity to reach out and care for others". I did not realise at the time, how Christlike that sounds. During the agony of the cross, Jesus prays for the soldiers "Father forgive them", he comforts the thief "Today you will be with me in paradise" and he tells his mother and the beloved disciple to look after each other, "Woman, here is your son".

Now, the third part. I did get some feedback from this encounter. A different spirit pervaded the conversations after this exchange. Mother and daughter were able to tread on the holy ground of their fraught relationship. I don't know where my words came from, but I believe that the Holy Spirit was able to use them as a witness to Christ and to move the people in a godly direction.

We can use the three parts of this incident to penetrate further into the experience of God as Trinity.

1. The lady who asked for the opinion of another about her parent represents a society that is trying to alleviate its suffering out of its own resources. We use advanced technology, accept only evidence based research, and bow to the autonomy of scientific data. All good. Yet our troubles don't seem to be getting any less, - not judging by the appeals that keep landing on my desk anyway. We are even asking the question, "What kind of Australia do we want when this present coronavirus crisis is past?" But we are not asking "How might our heavenly parent view our efforts?" We have a special opportunity to reflect on how God as creator suffers with the pain felt by God's own creatures, and why we employ the word "Father" to describe God's concern. If the belief that the

earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1) were more widespread there might be some hope for the powers that be to do something about caring for the environment. Climate change is more than a threat to our grandchildren. It is hurtful to God the giver of life, the Father who sees each sparrow fall.

2. The words, "In the midst of his own pain, Christ reached out to care for others" put our present suffering into perspective. In trouble, say, you receive a plate of scones or bunch of flowers from your church congregation. The significance is greater than the gift. Coming from the people with whom you break bread at the Eucharist, those gifts carry a message - The God who bears the pain of the world suffers with you, and Christ, through the sacrament particularly, is present with you, uniting you with the suffering love that is at the heart of God. Athanasius, in the 4th century, put it, "In Christ God became human so that we might become divine." Our word is "sanctification", though I haven't heard it much lately. It means allowing the Spirit to show you how Christ is with you, bringing you into the embrace of the caring Father. In our present imperfect state we are invited to participate in the life of the heavenly community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then to recreate that kind of community here - "Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven".

3. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that can move you from isolation to community, from estrangement to reconciliation, from meaningless pain to participation in the life of God the Father, through Christ the Son. The Spirit of God can teach you how to walk gently on Holy Ground.

What I am emphasising this morning is that to know God is to experience Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one unified episode. While we speak of three persons, it is one God, one unified experience. It is often in our suffering that the closeness of the suffering, caring God is experienced. Isaiah knew this when he wrote about the suffering servant. "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases". This is the God who hears the cry of the people, and inspires someone to act. This is the creator father who saw all was good, but now grieves for what humankind is doing. This is God the Son who embodies suffering love that we might dwell in the Father. This is God the advocate, who witnesses to the Son and the Father, and who enables us to talk about our experience of God with each other.

In so far as we can do this we become God's new creation, an earthly community in the image of the divine community of Father, Son and Spirit, where each dwells in the other and all work in unity.

There are several disclaimers I need to make.

All this is not to advocate the seeking of suffering. The prayer of Jesus "Let this cup (of suffering) pass from me is very important.

The discovery that the living God is present with you if you do suffer becomes an occasion for joy.

While suffering can be a way to know God, it is not the only way. The sense of the presence of God may come as you hear the Word, practise prayer, experience self-giving love, and so on.

As you journey on in your knowing God, your attempts to conceptualise this mystery at the heart of God will become less clear. God is so much bigger than our capacity to understand. Words are replaced by a sense of awe.

The formula Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not completely adequate. God is not contained within any name. But this is the best Christians can do. The threefold name keeps us in touch with the church from New Testament times, and in fellowship with the Church in its many forms around the world.

Matthew concludes his gospel with the triune name, and makes it a gospel imperative to baptise and teach in the name of Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Paul uses the formula in another way, to assure us that the grace-filled presence of the Trinity is with all of us.

So, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
