

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

**'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory.'**

(Isaiah 6:3b)

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

In the three biblical passages set for reading and reflection on Trinity Sunday in this middle year of the lectionary we have three marvellous angles on the holy mystery whom we name and worship as the one God, the creator, redeemer and perfecter of all things.

The God whom **Isaiah** encounters and worships in the Temple is the God who is three times holy, the King, the Lord of hosts, whose glory fills the temple and is discernible even in this broken and imperfect world, as the Psalm for the day also attests. This is the God whom Israel knew as its Covenant God, the God whom Jesus called 'Father' and whom the church was later to understand as the first Person of the Holy Trinity. It was common in the Eastern Orthodox Church to see the triple 'Holy' as evidence of the triune being of God.

The **Epistle** reading (from Romans) is chiefly about the Spirit of God who adopts us a God's children and makes us *heirs* of God and *joint heirs* with Christ, who is known throughout the NT as *Son of God*.

The **Gospel** reading is the well-known passage about the encounter between Nicodemus (a pharisee) and Jesus in which Jesus speaks about a new life and a new birth 'from above' or 'of the Spirit'. But this passage also speaks about Jesus, the Son of Man, who has descended from heaven and ascended into heaven, and through whom we may have eternal life. There is a lot in these two passages about Jesus Christ (the Son) and the Spirit, whom the church came to understand as the second and third Persons of the Holy Trinity.

These three passages, together with many others, provided the impetus for the doctrine of the *Trinity*, which the church hammered out over the early centuries and which remains a puzzle – and also an offence – to Jews and Muslims to this day. It's a problem, too, it seems for some Christians today.

[B] Knowing God

Can we really *know* that God is triune, both one and three? We do, of course, have to know our limits. It's problematic to think we can know *more* about God than is possible for finite and fallible creatures like us. Claiming too much knowledge about God can easily lead to fundamentalism and dogmatism; hardly a good thing!!

Nicholas Lash, a distinguished Cambridge theologian, remarks – with support from Thomas Aquinas – that if we think we can have God in our conceptual or imaginative sights, we can't be thinking about *God*. [Theology for Pilgrims, 57] He also quotes a good piece of advice from the philosopher, Wittgenstein: 'Never allow yourself to become too familiar with holy things.' [66]

Now God is not a ‘holy *thing*’; God is ‘holy *mystery*’, or as our ancestors, the Jews, would say, ‘the Holy *One* of Israel’. [2 Ki 19:22; Isa 1:4] Isaiah’s great vision of God [ch 6] encourages acclamation: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!’ That is safer than too much *description* of the Holy One! Yet speak about God we must, at least sometimes, despite the peril of speaking about what we cannot fully know. We have to find a middle way between two truths: on the one side, that we cannot know God as God really *is* – we can’t fathom the deep mystery of God’s being – and, on the other side, that God has actually made Godself known: in the world of nature; in the history of the Covenant people, Israel; and definitively in the person and career of Jesus Christ.

[C] God the Holy Trinity

On this day throughout the church we are encouraged to reflect on the truth that the **Holy One** (the *one* God) is also the **Holy Three**, classically known as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three trinitarian ‘Persons’. Many texts in the NT (and a few in the OT) provided the raw materials for the *doctrine* of the Trinity. The NT has a ‘trinitarian groundplan’, as it were, which could be built upon in subsequent theological thinking.

In the simplest terms, the argument runs like this: if God *works* in the world in a threefold way – the ancients said ‘in a trinitarian *economy*’ – then God must actually *be* trinitarian (or triune). If in creation and especially in the great work of salvation God *works* as Father, Son and Spirit, then we must think about God’s *being* according to the same pattern. If, as the Gospel of John repeatedly says, the Father and the Son are inseparably united – and if to have seen the Son is to have seen the *Father* – then God must *be* Father, Son and (by extension) Holy Spirit.

It isn’t a big step from there to say that God is *relational* in God’s very being; that God is a *communion* of Father, Son and Spirit; a communion of three *Persons*. Of course, we mustn’t think of the *divine* persons as being like *human* persons! *Human* persons are separate and distinct from other persons, but that doesn’t apply to the *divine* Persons. If we thought of the divine Persons as we do about *human* persons, we would end up believing in three gods, which is what Jews and Muslims think we do but which we deny. The Greeks used a word (*hypostasis*) which doesn’t mean what *we* mean by ‘person’, but unfortunately it was translated into Latin (the language of the Western church) by the word *persona*, from which we get the English ‘person’. The church went to great trouble to try to find the best words; but no human vocabulary in *any* language will ever be adequate when used to speak of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity claims to speak *truly* of God: God *is* actually triune. But it also serves as a kind of grammar, to help us to speak as truly and adequately as possible in the risky business of speaking about God at all! So to think trinitarianly of God helps the church to avoid thinking too narrowly about God: only about the *Creator*-God; only about *Jesus*, apart from his relation to God; or only about a *vague spiritual reality*. Each of the three ‘Persons’ of the Trinity is intimately related to the other two. To speak of *one* will always involve in speaking of the other *two*. We can’t think adequately about Jesus if we don’t think of his relation to God the Father and his relation to God the Spirit. So *not* to think trinitarianly about God – and indeed *worshipping* God trinitarianly – is almost inevitably to lead to inappropriate ways of thinking about God.

[D] The Trinity and the Christian life

Despite its importance, this doctrine of the Trinity has had rather a bad press, even in the church! Surprising as it may seem, there are not a few ministers of our church for whom it is completely marginal to their belief, if not denied altogether! One reason for this marginalisation is the view that the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing more than an irrelevant piece of abstraction, with no relation to our lives as people of faith. Now it may once have been easy to get that impression, but nothing could be further from the truth. There is indeed a *technical vocabulary* about the trinitarian persons and their mutual relations, which is helpful for discussing some tricky questions. But essentially the doctrine of the Trinity is about *living* the faith and *knowing* and *relating* to God in our lives and in our worship.

Let me quote three lines from an English theologian (Mike Higton) [*Christian Doctrine*, 90]:

- (1) To know God is to be *drawn into* that love and justice that has its origin in the *Father*.
- (2) To know God is to be *drawn into* that love in which we are *formed* by being *conformed* to the *Son*, who acts out that love in a form that we can know and take on.
- (3) To know God *is to be drawn into* that Christ-like love that is formed in us by the working of the *Spirit*, who conforms us to the love that unites the *Father* and the *Son*.

It is in relation to this God – and *in* this triune God – that we have live and move and have our being. It is this God with whom all things have their beginning; this God into whose service we, with Isaiah, are called.

It is this God who, in the person of *Jesus Christ*, entered into solidarity with us in our suffering and in the brokenness of sin; this God who in the person of the Son has been ‘lifted up’ so that humankind might have eternal life, and who has made us joint heirs with Christ of the promise of adoption as God’s children.

It is this God who, through the *Holy Spirit*, gives us a new birth and a new life, and who accompanies and energises us each day for the praise and service of God. It is the *Holy Spirit* who transforms our present life with the new life of God’s promised future, and who will give new form to this world, so that it will reflect more clearly the glory of God.

[E] Conclusion

Trinity Sunday gives us cause to reflect on the very *being* of God who has undertaken the great work of creation and redemption and who has promised to bring it to a glorious perfection. This God who is triune, *one God in three Persons*, is the God whom it is our joyful duty to worship and praise, whose purpose in creation gives shape to our lives, and who grants us in Christ a share in the richness of God’s intra-trinitarian life.

About this God we can only stammer a few inarticulate, perhaps incoherent words, for God far *transcends* every concept by which we might bring God to thought and speech. But this God, the Holy One of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has bridged the gap that divides us from God and made Godself *knowable*; and has, moreover, given us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who speaks the truth to us: about God, about us, and about the world in which we live.

- *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, to whom be all glory, dominion and praise, now and forever.*
