

St Brandon's, Sermon for 4th June 2023.

Isaiah 40:12-17. 27-end; Matthew 28:16-end

Today is a Church Festival

Alison Hobbs

Today is a church festival. A major one. We wear our white-gold colours and celebrate ... what? An impossibly difficult to grasp concept called the Trinity? Mmm.

Holding the concept of Trinity as a matter of faith, today we are celebrating the foundational principle of Christianity; the cradle of our faith: one God in three persons, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Our creed starts "We believe in One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Like the author of Isaiah, we emphasise that it is the One God, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, that we worship. Supreme and complete. The rhetorical questions the author poses - instead of answering leaves us to contemplate - all those questions point us to a God that contains/is made up of, all power and knowledge. God is all, and in all. *When Isaiah poses the question "Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counsellor has instructed him?"* We may prick our ears up and wonder if this is a reference to an internal dialogue between the three persons of the Trinity, but it is not, at least, not intentionally. Isaiah is very definitely speaking from the Jewish Scriptures, what we generally call the Old Testament, and what was distinctive about Israel's God, was his One-ness.

In a time when many gods were worshipped, each with their own character and attributed powers, the Jews insisted there was One God, singular and all-sufficing: a monotheistic religion. This was a big part of the problem of who Jesus was/is. The conundrum of the relationship Jesus claimed with God, as Father and Son, is not easily reconciled with monotheism, yet it is God - the same God - to which Jesus is referring.

It must have been extremely challenging to their personal sense of security and place in God's scheme, to risk believing in Jesus, openly following him and proclaiming his authority. That is a measure of how compelling the evidence must have been. Jesus had to convince enough Jews that he was of God to create a momentum so conversions would continue after his death because he had primarily come to the House of Israel, to bring them salvation. During his ministry, his vision did widen to include gentiles and Samaritans – hence the

commission on his last appearance to the disciples includes *'make disciples of all nations'* but he has to absolutely anchor who he is to the One true God that Israel worships. He cannot risk his followers becoming a sect following yet another new god, with a small g.

Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus starts talking about the Spirit that he will ask his father to send to the disciples following his death, and in this concluding commission - which were the final four verses of Matthew's gospel – he uses the term 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. They are to baptise 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.

Well, that further puts the cat among the pigeons, and before the end of the first century we see references to this triple person name of God being used in several places, including by Paul: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all".

And so the arguments began about the nature of God and the relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to each other, and their hierarchy. And the arguments continued until largely settled by councils held in Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century, in the doctrine we ascribe to which essentially says, they are equal persons that together form the Godhead: the One God. Not a fudge but a mystery, and the revelation that defines us as Christians: believers in the divinity of Jesus Christ, sent by the Father, and his in-dwelling Holy Spirit.

But it is not the achievement of establishing that doctrine that sets us on fire and fuels the festival celebration; it is the experience of the triune God – the living actions of that triune God in us, with us, for us, that we celebrate. This mysterious but faithful God that Israel knew, revealed himself in the fullness and simplicity of a human: what simpler way is there to learn than by another person teaching us?

That learning endures in the writings of the New Testament and other theological works, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We learn the story of Jesus, and are invited to live his story, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, and with the provision of the over-flowingly generous Father. The Father who embraces the prodigal son, forgiving us and loving us back to life through the

bridge that the Son established. The Son, with one foot on earth and one foot in heaven, the Son interpreting and pleading on our behalf, fully knowing how it is to live in the human condition. Some liken the interaction between the persons of the Trinity to an eternal dance: love, power, understanding – all that is, passing like a current between them as they dance; drawing us into the dance with them.

That is the fullness of the One God we worship.

And it's the fullness of the One God we serve.

When we endeavour to enter into the story of Jesus, and live the story as he lived it, we are assisted by each person of the Trinity, by the whole Godhead. That commission to go to all nations teaching the story, sharing the revelation, living the life, is daunting and demanding. It is spoken to us as much as the gathered eleven: an open-ending to the story of Jesus' life because that life is on-going. For believers, the Son of God is an intimate, ever-living person who goes on issuing this difficult commission but is at the same time, an ever-graceful divine presence with us.

A fortnight ago, we heard more about St Brandon's current commissioning as a Partner in Missional Church – the PMC team arranged the church café style and explained how the first of the three year commission has focussed on listening. Listening to each other and listening to God, and thereby learning more about the 'soft and hard data' of St Brandon's: its demographics, its relational attitudes within and beyond the congregation etc; and listening to gradually tease out something of what God's promised and preferred future is for this church so we can all act on that.

Instead of a sermon slot, we all participated in 'dwelling in the Word', using a commissioning passage from Luke and sharing what came to our attention with a 'friendly stranger' in the congregation. This was a great illustration of the Holy Spirit showing each of us a unique piece of the wisdom of the passage that raised for us a question, or new insight into the way of Jesus. At the same time, the Holy Spirit was helping us build relationships across the church as we listened attentively to the other baring their souls – or at least, sharing their thoughts – but it can feel like baring your soul when it comes from such an intimate source.

The conversations flowed on, even after the service had finished; everyone had participated, everyone had listened and shared, and it really felt that then as one body, we had worshipped, sung, and rejoiced in the power of God.

We were seeing the three graces mentioned in today's collect: the Holy Spirit helping us in talking about (confessing) our faith; acknowledging the glory through the story of the Son, all in the power of the Father.

That power from the divine, so eloquently described by Isaiah, able to add another dimension to even energetic youths, able to refresh and renew us, filling us with courage that overcomes our feebleness.

The power drawing us into the eternal dance, inviting us to participate in his story, accept the little bit of his commission that we can, instead of wilting at the enormity of what we can't. Accepting we are not called to do this work alone; celebrating that we have a wondrous, God in three persons.

Celebrating this Trinity Sunday.

Amen