

**Trinity Sunday**  
**St. Paul's, Milford**  
**31 May 2015: 8:00 and 9:30**

It was fashionable for a time to disparage the doctrine of the Holy Trinity – to ridicule it. To suggest that the Trinity is a sort of Committee God, a troika: God the creator, God the son and God the spirit. Some of us have used the analogy of water. I can recall in one parish bringing in a hot water jug and a block of ice in an effort to show that just as water manifests itself in three ways (ice, water, and steam), so too can God manifest himself (or herself) as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's a sort of new maths: 1+1+1 doesn't equal 3, but one!

One of our best known Trinity hymns, *Christ is made the sure foundation*, includes these words:

Laud and honor to the Father,  
Laud and honor to the Son,  
Laud and honor to the Spirit,  
Ever Three and ever One;  
Consubstantial, co-eternal,  
While unending ages run.

To which you might respond: what on earth was all that about?

You will be aware that there are two official creeds of the Church used in our worship: the Nicene Creed and the shorter Apostles' Creed. There is actually a third, the Athanasian Creed, immediately after the services of Morning and Evening Prayer in the old Book of Common Prayer. The Prayer Book commanded that it be used on Trinity Sunday, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas, and the Feast of the Annunciation. You will be relieved to know that our NZPB makes no such requirement.

It goes on for pages, making statements such as:

The Father eternal, the Son eternal and the Holy Ghost eternal.  
And yet there are not three eternals, but one eternal.

It also has this classic statement:

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

Which led one wit (I think it was George Bernard Shaw) to conclude: the whole jolly lot incomprehensible!

Anglicans have always had a soft spot for the Holy Trinity. Chances are that a church dedicated to the Holy Trinity is likely to be an Anglican church and of course, our own cathedral takes its name from the Trinity. Until recently Anglicans numbered the Sundays for half the year as 'Sundays after Trinity'.

What is being proposed in the Trinity is a sort of 'new maths' in which one plus one plus one equals one: one God. So in the Creed we will recite we affirm that we believe in One God and then go on to talk about “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”.

Let us turn to two of the readings for today. Hopefully they will shed light on the Trinity. At first sight, however, they seem to have only a passing link with the Trinity, but let's explore further.

The lesson from Isaiah tells the tale of the prophet having a vision. Isaiah is at church, or the temple anyway. He's in the midst of a most beautiful scene. Angels surround him; they fill every available place. The temple is full of smoke, holy smoke. It might have been incense. It's a scene of great beauty.

But in the middle of all this he sees God and shouts:

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

In the face of the majesty of God Isaiah recoils in fear, conscious of his unworthiness.

Perhaps we have lost that feeling of total inadequacy in the face of God? We tend rather to recoil from mystery itself. Yet God showed himself not to frighten Isaiah, but to love him and to send him out to tell others about God. God's purpose was to adopt Isaiah and to fill Isaiah with strength and purpose.

Have you ever had a vision or experience such as this? I recall one such occasion. It was at All Saints in Dunedin. We were there for a servers' guild festival 50 years ago. We sang a hymn I'd never heard before. It was that wonderful Vaughan Williams tune *For all the Saints*. In that moment I glimpsed something of the communion of saints, a church that was bigger than I'd experienced. I was linked with those who had gone before and with those as yet unborn.

We turn to the gospel. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. You see, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and it wouldn't have done for him to be seen with Jesus. And so he comes to him by night, out of sight, but with an open mind. So, just as Isaiah experienced God in a dream by night, so Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Both were looking for something they lacked. Nicodemus, a leader in Israel, is curious. He has come to think that Jesus is particularly close to God in a unique way. He's never met anyone quite like Jesus.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to know what God is doing then he has to start from scratch and “be born anew”. Nicodemus finds that statement incredible. Here is a mystery and a seeming impossibility: how can someone possibly be born when they are old? How can anyone be born after having grown old?

Basically, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to have a transplant, not unlike a bone marrow transplant. But by water, through the Spirit. Nicodemus has to be re-born. “How can these things be?” asks Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he alone has “gone up into heaven and he has come down from heaven, for he is ‘the son of man’”. We don’t have time today to unpack that statement, except to say that 'Son of Man' is a phrase a first-century Jew associated with the Messiah, the Chosen One.

Jesus then reminds them of the story of Moses and the serpent. Nicodemus would have been familiar with that. Moses made a bronze serpent (or snake) and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. It was a constant reminder of the power of God. In much the same way as early missionaries in Papua New Guinea erected a cross on a hill above a village they had converted to Christianity. The cross was a visible reminder of the faith they had embraced.

“So, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so in the same way the son of man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may share in the life of God’s new age. This, you see, is how much God loved the world; enough to give his only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost, but should share in the life of God’s new age. After all, God didn’t send his son into the world to condemn the world, but so the world could be saved by him.”

So much for that. But we might well ask: what has that to do with our vision of God the Three in One? The three 'Persons' who are God are not drawn apart by their perfect individuality, but united into one through love. Jesus, in being lifted up, in dying, demonstrates what self-sacrificial love looks like. Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and the story goes, all who touched the serpent were made whole. So we are invited to touch Jesus and to be made whole, and as whole people to be drawn into God’s incredible selfless love.

Why?

Isaiah, through his vision of God’s majesty was touched, was made whole and then hears God’s call to serve the God who loves the world. Each of us, in baptism, have been 'born from above' in order that we may witness to God’s love and share it in the world. We too have been called to give our lives, imperfect as we are. In that act of sheer love and obedience we have been made worthy to be God’s friends, *his* presence, as the church in a divided world.

We have been commissioned to show what real love is all about, as we are filled with the presence of God’s forgiving, restoring, compelling love. Put aside our own limitations, our doubts, our lack of experience or whatever holds us back. All we can reply is: “Here am I. Send me.”

*Noel Derbyshire*