

Readings for Trinity Sunday

30th May 2021

First Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “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!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Second Reading: Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Gospel: St John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“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.

A Reflection for Trinity Sunday

‘Wood Sorrel’ and the Holy Trinity.

It is lovely to be back in the Highlands after too long away. I’ve had a great time catching up with old friends and to be back at Dundonnell, where I have been able once again to immerse myself in the beauty of God’s creation that surrounds that place. On my morning walk in the woods this week I have been walking on carpets of Wood Sorrel in flower, interspersed with dog violets and primroses, which are all indicator plants of ancient woodland.

The wood sorrel is a small creeping plant on the woodland floor. It is easily overlooked in the company of its showier neighbours, the yellow primrose and the Violet. It has a small delicate white bell-shaped flower. and a trefoil leaf. Indeed, you are more likely to notice its leaves before its flower. The leaves are the classic shape of the Irish shamrock and it is one of 4 or 5 plants that are used as shamrocks. It was supposedly used by St Patrick as a way of helping people understand the idea of the Holy Trinity. Whether he did or not is a thing of legend. One of the really good things we do know about Patrick is that he was Welsh, and he probably came from the Strathclyde region of what is now Scotland.

That he needed something to illustrate the idea of the Holy Trinity is not surprising, because if we are honest, we struggle to understand it, yet alone to see its relevance in our daily lives.

The God that you and I worship today is one God. A God of one essence – one substance and, as our creed reminds us, we believe in one God who exists in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Each Person in the Trinity is fully God and fully a Person. They are equally eternal, powerful, sovereign, and worthy of worship. But they are one God and as it was drummed into me by one of my tutors on my theology course, *where God is, the whole of God is.*

It can be all very confusing and difficult to get your mind around, but this idea is central to the Christian faith. So much of what we know about what God does is wrapped up in who God is.

But while this idea is central to the Christian faith, it is also incredibly mysterious to us. It is hard to understand. And in our efforts to grasp it, people have come up with various ways of helping to explain it.

Hence the idea that the Trinity can be compared to the leaf of the wood sorrel or shamrock. The analogy explains that in the same way that one shamrock can have three leaves on it, the Trinity has three Persons that constitute one.

Other ways of explaining the Holy Trinity from the natural world include that of an apple (with the peel, the flesh, and the core) or an egg (with its shell, yoke, and white).

These images fall short, because these components aren't enough to be considered a whole on their own. If you looked at a single wood sorrel leaf, you would not call it a shamrock. If all you had of an egg were its shell, you would not have a very exciting breakfast. If you only had an apple core, you wouldn't pack it in your lunch box.

But in the Godhead, the Holy Trinity, each Person is fully and completely God unto Himself (even as they are all one).

Maybe the people of the time of St Patrick had less of a problem in understanding the Holy Trinity than we do. For them, the idea of the Trinity dove tailed into how they understood the reality of everyday life.

We know from Gaelic myth, stories, and poetry that people did not recognise a divide between the natural world, the world of nature and the world of human beings.

These were not seen as separate spheres but were understood as one reality.

Furthermore, the spiritual and indeed the supernatural world were also indistinguishable from the natural world, there was no understanding that the material world existed separately from the spiritual world.

In our post Enlightenment world, we have built a barrier between humanity and the natural world and between our spiritual and physical selves.

Perhaps in our modern more scientific age we can use water as an analogy to explain the Holy Trinity.

You could say that God is like H₂O – like water. Water can exist in liquid at room temperature. Heat it up, and it turns to vapor. Cool it down, and it'll eventually freeze into a solid. But it's all water.

The problem with this analogy is that it portrays God as not existing in three persons. He is one God who expresses Himself in three modes – Father, Son, and Spirit. But it's all the same person, operating in three roles or functions. In the same way, water is all the same molecular structure, expressing itself in three different modes.

I suppose in the end, all analogies break down, but I do find something appealing in the way early Gaelic culture viewed the world.

What it gives you is a way of seeing the world as a triangle of relationships – of God – humanity - and the Earth, that are integrated in an interrelationship rather than being three distinct entities. In our modern world the human life and the natural are seen as being distinct from each other and are in turn distinct from the spiritual world.

This integration and interrelationship between God – humanity and earth seem to me to be a reflection of the Holy Trinity itself.

One of the leading theologians of the 12th Cent, was a Scotsman named Richard St Victor. He compared the reality of the Trinity with a lover, the loved, and love itself, and that it is in relationship that the Holy Trinity makes sense. It is a delightful and joyous living relationship of intertwining and mutual love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This sense of delight and joy is reflected in much of Wisdom literature in the bible, that include the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs tells us how God in creative love established the heavens, and fountains of the deep, and the foundations of the earth, and that Wisdom was God's daily delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race.¹

According to John's Gospel, it is the Word who is there in the beginning, the Word that was made flesh and who dwelt amongst us – Jesus Christ the incarnate God. Wisdom and the Word are one.

The Trinity is God the Father, the source of all things in God's creative love,

God the Son, the Word, and the Wisdom, the one in whom we and all creation are held together,

And God the Giver of Life, the Holy Spirit, the energy of God's Will and purpose.

From him and through Him and to him in the unity of the Holy Spirit world without end, come all things.

I believe it is important to the future of humanity that we find again the coherence of a Trinitarian relationship between God – Humanity – and the Earth, then we may rediscover who we are, and who we are to be. We may even rediscover our role in relationship to God's earth, our interdependence with all other creatures and our responsibility under God to care for them.

So, the next time you come across Wood Sorrel, pause, see in its leaves a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and reflect on your relationship to it and to God.

¹ Proverbs 8.