

## Readings for Trinity Sunday

4<sup>th</sup> June 2023

### First Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the

earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Brothers and sisters, put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

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

Gospel: St Matthew 26:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

**A Reflection for Trinity Sunday**

On those occasions when I actually stop to think about everyday life, it amazes me how many things we take for granted. Think, for instance, of your favourite piece of music and how you might describe it to a friend. But what if your friend had been deaf from birth and never heard a sound, let alone music where would you begin? Effective communication relies on a degree of common experience – something we often take for granted – and it’s very difficult to communicate an idea when there’s no common experience to underpin it.

This Sunday is Trinity Sunday – a day which can sorely try our ability to communicate as we’re encouraged to think about one of the key doctrines shared by virtually all the mainstream Christian denominations – the idea that God is indisputably one, a single entity, but that within that unity there are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

As we approach one of the great mysteries of the Christian Faith we need to be careful that the exercise doesn’t become as unreasonable as asking two people who are colour-blind to discuss the colours of the rainbow.

It’s tempting for preachers to think that they might just come up with a wonderfully simple insight that will make clear to their hearers (as well as themselves) the inner workings of God. However, the uncomfortable truth is that at

the heart of our faith there is an intractable mystery that is beyond the capacity of any human mind, no matter how brilliant, to understand or explain.

That might sound like an appeal to sloppy, religious thinking in an age where the precise language of science, and its emphasis on verifiable fact, makes mincemeat of words like *mystery*. However, one of my favourite quotes from the world of science – which I think I may have shared with you before – is from the Nobel Laureate, Richard Feynman, an acknowledged expert in the field of quantum physics. Quite simply, Feynman said, “If you think you understand quantum physics, you don’t understand quantum physics.”

The problem isn’t that people are too stupid or lack the necessary background to understand – it’s that the way things behave when you start to look on the scale of atoms and below, the so-called *quantum world*, is so different to our everyday experience of things behave that it just doesn’t make sense. Its predictions are borne out and are used every day, the numbers and equations are proven to work, but the human mind just can’t fully grasp at an intuitive level what’s actually going on. “If you think you understand quantum physics, you don’t understand quantum physics.” ... and, dare I say, “If you think you understand the Holy Trinity, you don’t understand the Holy Trinity!”

It isn’t a cop-out to say that the Holy Trinity is a mystery – it’s an essential starting point at the beginning of any exploration.

But, if it’s a mystery, isn’t all this talk about doctrine and all the rest – even the idea of the Holy Trinity itself – just so much hot air and a waste of our time?

Well, let’s just take a little time thinking about how the Christian tradition got to this point. It begins with the experience of Jesus’s followers – and, indeed, in some of the things the gospels record Jesus saying.

Think of passages like Sunday’s gospel reading from Matthew – with Jesus telling his followers to baptize ... “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*” – and St Paul’s valediction to the Corinthians ... “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*” Passages like these give us nothing like a fully worked out doctrine of the Trinity, but they do raise the questions, “*Just who is this Jesus who calmed the storm, fed the hungry, healed the sick and even raised the dead? Who is this Jesus who allowed himself to be executed, rose from the dead and sent the Holy Spirit to transform a frightened and dispirited group into a force that would change history? And just what, or who, is the Holy Spirit?*”

To those who had walked with Jesus in his travels, watched his death and witnessed his resurrection, the inescapable conclusion was that God had walked among them. They didn’t need any logical explanation, indeed what they’d experienced defied logic and their absolute conviction as Jews that God is uniquely and absolutely one – but, nonetheless, the evidence of their own eyes and hearts was completely compelling. This man Jesus, who had prayed to the Father and succumbed to death, was, in some inexplicable way, God.

Likewise, those who directly experienced the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, could find no other way to describe what they saw and felt than that God had been in their midst and, indeed, within them.

But, of course, so much has happened between then and now. The eye-witnesses died; people speculated about what had actually happened, some of them with malicious intent; Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and theological conviction and controversy became as much an issue of political power as the pursuit

of truth; human thinking developed and changed with the so-called *Enlightenment* and the blossoming of scientific thought.

Even that vast oversimplification of history gives an idea of how much separates our experience from those who first saw and believed – and one thing to bear in mind is how much of that history has been marked by controversy. When we consider some of the key doctrines of our faith, like the Holy Trinity, it's misleading to think of them as well-considered statements attempting to convey the reality of God. Many of our doctrinal statements, such as our creeds, are not so much portraits of God as *theological fences* – barriers marking the boundaries of the Church's understanding, there to keep the faithful from wondering off into the unknown or, more likely, to keep those with dangerous or malicious misconceptions out.

So what are we left with, and is it worth anything? Well, if we look to our creeds and our tradition to explain away the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith, we'll look in vain. Like those who study quantum physics, we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that human understanding is limited and that there are things which will always remain beyond our ken. However, like those who study quantum science, we have '*formulas*' and '*equations*' which work – we have the lived experience of the tradition in which we stand; two thousand years of thought, prayer and reflection focussed on that mystery at the core of our faith.

Perhaps the most profound insight we have from that living tradition is that at the heart of the God whom we worship; the God who we believe to be the ground of all being; the God who walked on earth in the person of Jesus; the God who is present in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit – at the heart of that God is what can best be described as a *relationship love*. The trouble is that those words – "*a relationship of love*" – are themselves a human concept that sell woefully short the power at the heart of creation and of all being.

What we celebrate on this Trinity Sunday is not a neat little picture that likens God to this, that or the other, cutting God down to the size of our understanding. We celebrate a mystery which two thousand years of contemplation has only deepened: that in Jesus Christ that one God who is beyond all time and space walked among us, suffered and died for us; and that in the Holy Spirit that one God walks among us today.

We celebrate the mystery that at the heart of that God is a love so strong that the three persons we call the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are radically and eternally one.

We celebrate that the nature of God is for that love to overflow and permeate the whole universe, love which we see supremely in the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus and experience in the working of the Holy Spirit.

Above all, we celebrate the truth borne out by two thousand years of controversy as well as contemplation, corruption as well as faithfulness, dishonesty as well as the pursuit of truth – the truth that despite all of humanity's failings, that great love at the heart of all being reaches out to us and invites us to be redeemed and made afresh, to become more and more part of that relationship of divine love which ultimately makes all things one.

Might I suggest, on this Trinity Sunday, that the mystery of the Holy Trinity is something we are invited to experience; that the God whom we worship is not to be understood but, rather, in the words of the hymn, "*...ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.*"