

Readings for Trinity Sunday

26th May 2024

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

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day I have heard referred to a ‘preach a heresy’ Sunday as clergy everywhere struggle, once again, to find simple analogies to explain the inexplicable. The mystery of God remains just that, mysterious; at least to an extent beyond the limits of our understanding and the limits of our language to describe. Perhaps the best analogy I came across this week was that the Trinity is like a Jaffa Cake: 3 components – chocolate, jam and sponge – but if you try to pick it apart you end up with a sticky mess!

This is not to say that knowledge and understanding in matters of our faith are unimportant, but they are not the be all and end all of our Christian lives. Jesus didn’t set his disciples exams to find out how much they knew; he called them to follow his example.

So, instead of trying to pick apart the Jaffa Cake, let us look at the images and insights into the nature of God that today’s readings give us, and what they tell us about living our lives following Jesus’ example.

The passage from Isaiah is his account of his call to follow God, in his case to be God’s prophet, through his vision of God in the Temple. This part of the book of Isaiah is thought to have been written in the 8th century BCE, with the prophet calling the people, and particularly their leaders, to repentance for their immoral behaviour, for their failure to live according to the laws given to them by God.

In the Temple, Isaiah has this vision of God enthroned in splendour, attended by seraphs. Isaiah is only too aware of his own limitations and failings, and those of his people. He says: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...’ Nevertheless, he is granted this vision of God, cleansed of his guilt by the touch of the live coal, and given a job to do. Unlike most prophets, he willingly accepts God’s call: ‘Here am I; send me!’

We know that Isaiah’s prophecy, like that of many of the other prophets, and later Jesus too, faced opposition and was largely ignored. Calls to repentance, suggestions that we might not be doing as well as we like to think, are generally not popular. In reality, none of us likes criticism and our instinctive response is to resist, to justify our own position. Isaiah reminds us of the need for humility, to accept that we are not always right. He also shows us that, despite our imperfections, God has a role for each of us. Sometimes we may be called to speak out in love, to go beyond our comfort zone and say difficult things that may cause us to be opposed or rejected. This should not be

discouraging. Ultimately, Isaiah's message is an invitation to faithful discipleship, and his warning of coming punishment was followed by God's promise of restoration.

The reading from Romans speaks of the Holy Spirit as God's messenger who transforms believers into children of God. It could be interpreted for each of us on an individual basis, but Paul uses the plural form of 'you' suggesting it is more about how we live our communal life as a church family. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God; all have received the Spirit of adoption as God's children, so all are part of God's family. As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' And, as part of that church family, the Spirit enables us to follow the will of God together. None of us is perfect but together we help each other, sharing our gifts to build up the whole. And, to return to Isaiah briefly, it's why listening to one another, especially when someone has something difficult to say, is also important: they may have an insight we don't have.

This language used in this reading indicates a whole web of different relationships: brother, sister, debtors, flesh, Spirit, body, children, God, adoption, Father, heirs... It is a reminder that, within the family of the church, we relate to one another and to God in many different ways, often simultaneously.

With writing like the first paragraph here, we can often think in binary terms. Paul seems to equate Spirit and flesh, which we often associate with mind and body respectively, with good and bad. But God created both mind and body in God's image and there should be no such separation. The Spirit permeates both, something that is exemplified in the idea that God breathes life into us just as God breathes the Spirit into us, and indeed as God breathes life and Spirit into all creation.

Being children of God makes us all responsible with and for each other and all creation in ways that bring fullness of life. It is a joint responsibility in which each of us is free to be as God created us to be, but together each is more than it would be alone, and the sum of the whole is greater than the parts.

There are similar ideas in today's Gospel in Jesus' rather cryptic dialogue with Nicodemus. Nicodemus' questions revolve around who is a child of God. Although those words are not used, they are implicit in Jesus' statement: 'No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.' To be part of that Kingdom, to be a child of God, as Jesus goes on to say, is to be born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus recognised that Jesus was from God. He was a man of learning, yet he struggled to understand Jesus' words, taking them too literally, but he was also willing to question and listen, which required humility. We don't know if Nicodemus finally understood what Jesus was telling him but he appears twice more in John's Gospel, firstly to defend Jesus' right to a hearing when the Pharisees were trying to arrest, although they dismissed that on the grounds that 'no prophet is to arise from Galilee'; and secondly after Jesus' death when Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus' body. That he was still around suggest that he remained open to Jesus' teachings.

This Gospel also indicates relationship of Trinity through action: having spoken of need to be born of Spirit, Jesus, in probably the best-known verse of the Bible, says: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' and '...in order that the world might be saved through him'.

Together these readings give us three different images of God for Trinity Sunday: God enthroned in splendour from Isaiah, and if we had used the Psalm set for today (Psalm 29) we would also had an image of God enthroned over

all creation; the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in both Romans and John; and God the Son in action as an example of the values of God's kingdom, teaching and encouraging those who seek.

And for our lives as God's people together, we are reminded by Isaiah of the importance of following God's call willingly and with humility; by Romans that, as children of God, we live in relationship and mutual responsibility with and to one another; and by Nicodemus of the need to seek and persevere even where we do not fully understand.

Perfect understanding is not a pre-requisite for receiving the gracious, all-embracing love of the triune God, who sent the Son to save not condemn, so that we might be born of the Spirit as children of God.