

St John & St Stephen's Church, Orts Road, Reading, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2024, Trinity Sunday  
Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17. **The Dancing Trinity**

Just wondering how many of us woke up this morning and said, 'Yes! It's Trinity Sunday!'. I'm guessing not too many. It doesn't have the feel of Christmas Day, or Easter Day, or even Pentecost, does it? Yet the season of Trinity (which starts today) is the longest season of the church's year – 22 weeks, longer by far than Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent or Easter. It's also called 'Ordinary Time': the everyday, the normal season of faith. That tells us something. The Trinity is perhaps the normal resting place of our faith but maybe that's not what we think of. The liturgical colour for this season is green, the colour we see normally in nature, in our lives. The colour of creation, and of rest.

But you won't find the word 'Trinity' in the Bible. The word comes from the Latin '*trinus*' meaning 'threefold' and it refers to our Christian belief that in a mysterious way, although God is One, He is also Three: there is a community of three Persons within the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine developed as the early church wrestled with how to put together their belief in Jesus as the Son of God with their belief in God the Father; and then they had to fit in the Holy Spirit who showed up at Pentecost and – guess what – She turned out to be God too. In 325 AD a Council of Bishops met at Nicaea (in what is now Turkey) and formulated what we know as the Nicene Creed which sets out clearly our faith in God as Trinity. We'll say that together a bit later! This new understanding of God – One God – yet revealed as Three Persons is unique to Christianity, and is absolutely central to our faith. We are baptised into the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we are blessed in that holy Name and we are held in the same love that binds the Holy Trinity of Persons together.

I just want to take a peek at the two passages we have heard read this morning so we can see the basis in scripture for this belief, this doctrine. The gospel reading was from John chapter 3, and it mentions all three Persons of the Trinity. We find the Pharisee Nicodemus debating with Jesus what it means to be 'born again'. Jesus tells him that can only happen when a person is '*born from above*' which he explains like this: '*Very truly, I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit...you must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it...so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*' (vv.5-8). A bit later, we can find what is probably the most famous verse in the Bible: '*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life*' (v.16). Here we have God (the Father) giving the Son (Jesus) in love in order to save the world. In these few verses we also learn something about them: The Spirit brings us to new birth in the kingdom of God, She is like a wind, unseen but powerful, blowing us where She chooses. God the Father loves the world and out of that love sends the Son. Now let's look at the OT reading from Isaiah 6, written 700 years before Christ. We need to put on our Christian spectacles and, looking through them, perhaps discern some subtle references, bearing mind that Isaiah couldn't know exactly how things would pan out 700 years later. It's Isaiah's awe-filled vision of God, and he sees the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and there are seraphs hovering around Him calling out: '*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts*' (v.3) – which is where the first words of our first hymn 'Holy, holy holy' come from – does this threefold 'holy' refer to the Trinity? We can maybe read it like that. Admittedly, it's a bit weak. The second reference is stronger. God says to Isaiah, '*Whom shall I send and who will go for us?*' (v.8) It's that 'us' – that suggestion of a *community* in the Godhead. It's very reminiscent of the verse in Genesis, the creation story where, at the end of his creative activity God creates humanity with these words: '*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...*' (Genesis 1:26).

Let's think about what associations we might make with each person of the Trinity. The Father: Creator, powerful, source of life, sustainer, full of love; then with the Son, Jesus: born as a human being, merciful, the saviour, experiencing suffering and death, resurrected; the Spirit: the creative force of God, filling human hearts, like a wind, like a dove, like flowing water. This list could go on and on! It's not enough just to say, 'I believe in God' – but what is it that you or I believe about God? When we say we believe in the Trinity, the Three-in-One, there is a richness, a depth, a fulness in that faith, and all of what we have mentioned is included. All that we can say about God as Trinity revolves around one central truth: that is love. The three Persons are held together in *love*. It is much more than just a feeling, a sentiment, although it is that as well; it is a love that is always reaching out, always giving. God the Father in love reaches out and creates the universe, the earth and all that is in it; and He sustains it all. We can see the sacrificial reality of this reaching-out most clearly in the sending of the Son, Jesus: born of a human mother, fully human and yet, mysteriously, fully God; living among us, teaching, healing, challenging, unjustly condemned,

crucified, risen, ascended. The Spirit, sent at Pentecost, creative force, the wind, the breath of God, flowing into us, enlivening, filling, giving gifts to each of us to build the kingdom. May we take a moment of stillness...

Some of us here, and many Christians, have a simple prayer practice of making the sign of the cross, in the Name of the Father, Son and Spirit. It's a kind of body prayer. At the end of the service, Christine will make the sign of the cross and give a blessing in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Very powerfully, these gestures says this: the Trinity is cross-shaped. The love of God for humankind and the world is nowhere more vividly seen than in the life, death and resurrection of the Carpenter of Nazareth.



Many artists have tried to represent the Trinity. Some images are more helpful than others! I'm going to share two images: the first painting is called 'the Dancing Trinity' – you can see three figures whirling around in a dance, linked to each other and forming one multicoloured shape. This picks up the ancient idea of the trinity as *perichoresis* – which is a Greek word meaning either a rotation, or a dance, depending on the Greek spelling. Actually either works! I love the idea of the Trinity dancing through creation, unseen, and our task is almost to tune into that... The other image is a symbolic painting – I really love this – images of doves, of threes in various shapes, the background



of the cross and the sense of power....

We have great need of strong faith, faith in the fulness of God as understood in our faith in God as Trinity. The world is literally changing. Every age in history has brought its challenges, but it really does feel like these times are especially difficult. I'm thinking particularly of the climate crisis which is becoming an increasing reality and affects every person on the planet to a greater or lesser degree; we are experiencing it now. There is also the threat of a belligerent Russia and perhaps China too; and who knows what AI, artificial intelligence, is going to bring? It may be that we are at the end of the world as we know it. And we do not know what comes next. The next decades are not going to be like the last few decades. We need to be sure in ourselves, in our souls and bodies, that God has not abandoned us, that He is with us. That is not the same as saying that everything's going to turn out OK.

The Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit needs to find in us a trinity of faith, hope, and love. Faith, hope and love are mentioned by St Paul at the end of his famous chapter on love in his first letter to the church at Corinth, chapter 13. They are called 'the Godly Virtues', and they are gifts. We can't work them up: they are received as we bring ourselves consciously to God. How will our faith, hope and love stand up in times of difficulty? How are we sustaining and feeding that now? I want to suggest that finding spiritual practices that sustain our faith, hope and love, that engage with God is a really important task for us. I mean prayer, meditation, worship, fellowship, holy communion, spiritual conversation, spiritual direction, pilgrimage, retreat. This is how we will be able to negotiate difficult times, by attending to the nurture of our inner lives, by rooting and grounding ourselves in the mystery of God, in the dance of the Trinity who, full of love, sustains and energises us and gives all that we are and all that we need. I will end here by quoting a verse from the famous prayer, St Patrick's breastplate. It sums up everything I want to say. I would like to suggest that a spiritual practice for us might be to use this powerful prayer for ourselves. I have made some copies of this, ask me if you would like one. Here's the last verse of the prayer:

*I bind unto myself today,  
The strong name of the Trinity:  
By invocation of the same,  
The Three in One and One in Three,  
Of Whom all nature hath creation,  
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:  
Praise to the Lord of my salvation  
Salvation is of Christ the Lord*