

Trinity Sunday - 30th May 2021 – St. Matthew's

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

It may sound daft, but I remember the first time I heard our first reading today from Isaiah in church. No, I am not that much of an expert on the Old Testament, but we were in a Baptist church in Edinburgh. Someone was sat next to me – mentioning no names, and he nudged me and said, “In the King James version it says “His train filled the temple and the house filled with smoke”. At least that is what it sounded like – but who knows?

It was only later that I was told that this is the passage read at ordination and other vocational services. That of course relates to the bit about the Lord saying “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The writer, being whichever one was writing as Isaiah at this point, says “Here am I; send me!” It is an impressive piece of volunteering, of responding to God's call, and a reaction to a memorable scene of Seraphs and detailed descriptions of God's agents, revealing the glory of the Lord.

It also points out that the writer, the visionary if you like, is well aware of their own guilt and that of the people, who have presumably been saying and doing the wrong things. Happily for them, the guilt is wiped out, the sin is blotted out. Because this is the Lord, God, the leader of hosts. Altogether this is an impressive passage, full of the imagery which can be confusing, but some how is made personal. If this was a book review, I would point out how the writer has used the narrative to make this a personal story, of dealing with the guilt that we all feel at times, of trying to convey a sense of God being present in our lives. It is not an easy concept to get over – and an important one on Trinity Sunday when we are meant to think about how God is three and one.

Our Gospel reading today is from John, and it features someone doing what many of us would like to do, ask some questions. Nicodemus is an important person among the Jews, an educated man in the rules and laws that had been handed down over generations, but this Jesus, this teacher, is a new thing, a leader come from God. There is of course the discussion about being reborn, which for a moment confuses Nicodemus. Jesus hastens to say that it is about being reborn in the Spirit, a new start. Many people have argued over what this passage is about, what Jesus is trying to say as reported by John. And there are no easy answers.

At the moment many of us have questions. When will life return to normal? Can we cope with the current situation for much longer? How unfair is this situation? While asking questions is one way of learning – I think I read that somewhere – there are times when we need answers. I think it's interesting that Nicodemus is asking questions before the crucifixion and resurrection; we can only imagine the questions he would have asked after that. Nicodemus calls Jesus "Teacher", and fair play, Jesus tries to teach him, tries to set out for him and anyone who reads this record what it means to be a Christian.

This passage has created problems for Christians for decades. Some people have taken it to mean that a person can only be a real Christian if they are "born again" have a real conversion experience, a real point when they can say that they became a Christian. I think for most of us it's not like that. Maybe we went to church as a child, and being a Christian, a churchgoer, was a gradual growing into it, and that even when we moved on geographically we still found a home in a local church. Maybe we came to church later as the result of a move, to University or because we attended a group, a special service, or met someone who already went to church and we went along.

Jesus says it is difficult to understand, even though these are earthly things. How difficult will it be to understand heavenly things? So many questions. No easy answers.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and thumbing through the Church Times I found the admission that Christians don't really understand what the Trinity means. I have a vague memory of watching a dubious film some years ago where the main characters have to explain the Trinity (I told you it was dubious). They understandably panic, and grab a clover leaf, or indeed a shamrock, and show how it was three parts but one whole. I also remember in this very church waving photographs around of ice, gas and flowing water explaining that water is one of the few things that can be liquid, gas and solid while still being the same thing. I'm not sure my ability to explain it is any more sophisticated now. Again, the Church Times piece assures me that the good thing about the Trinity is that God's, Jesus' and the writers' views on the Trinity are blended throughout the Bible. That is in contrast to the Ten Commandments which are just plonked into the Old Testament.

But that still leaves us with the questions. Yes, these theological questions are important, of great significance to some. Does understanding the Trinity any better really help us today? In a country which is still coping with a once in a

generation situation? When people are scared and confused and therefore angry? There are recriminations and blame flying around which fill our news programmes and papers. Do we take any notice?

For me these passages raise questions, and we perhaps can't cope much with that at the moment. We want certainty, reassurance. That is the human condition. Some of us have been happy to experience the return of legal hugs, if cautious. I have certainly enjoyed finally tracking down both Harry and Hannah for overdue hugs, but am not looking to involve anyone else, don't be nervous ... Hugs are about reassurance, a warm feeling for most of us, but can be a bit threatening for others. Some of us enjoy questions, quizzes, admitting we don't have all the answers, even the pointless ones. Some of us are not interested. Give us answers and certainties. Then we can do something.

Maybe faith is not having all the answers all of the time. Not being certain of the definitions, especially if that means we become dogmatic, certain and therefore keen to tell everything else that our way is the only correct one, and you had better believe it too. Maybe a bit of uncertainty is what we need, so we can keep searching, looking for our answers. I really don't know. An online question I spotted was "Is Trinity Sunday a public holiday?". The answer is no, of course, not a Sunday marked by chocolate eggs or anything else like that, even though there is coincidentally a Bank Holiday tomorrow. Maybe that reflects the uncertainty, the questions asked in these passages, our confusion with what the Trinity is and how much we therefore celebrate it. We all have so many questions today, most of which are difficult to answer, if not impossible. All we can do is try to hang onto our faith, our love for others, and our love for God in the days and weeks to come. Amen.