

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE MOST HOLY AND UNDIVIDED TRINITY

Readings: *Isaiah 6: 1–8;* *Psalm 29;* *Romans 8: 12–17;* *John 3: 1–17*

It is a great sadness that, again, we can't meet together face-to-face today. Sad, because Trinity Sunday is a wonderfully exciting day: a day on which we celebrate the core or heart of the Christian faith. That heart is that the God we worship and believe in is an eternal community of love: hence, it is especially sad that, today, the community of God in this place can't gather together *as* community physically! Yet, perhaps the circumstances of this year in Melbourne give us an opportunity to think even further about what being a people of the God we worship and know as Trinity means for and demands of us.

It is increasingly less the case, thankfully; but for many years, 'Trinity Sunday' was seen as being a 'difficult' Sunday for preachers. It was the Sunday on which vicars would usually delegate the preaching to their curates, for instance. Or, as happened in my former ministries (as head of a theological college and lecturer in a faculty of Theology), I would often find myself being invited (to churches that otherwise wouldn't ever think of inviting me!) to preach on Trinity Sunday. I suppose the thought was, perhaps he can make sense of it all for us; or, even if he can't, the fact that we've invited him along shows that we think Trinity Sunday is important, somehow, and that, having made the effort, we can leave it aside and get on with all of those 'Ordinary Sundays' that occupy the rest of the year!

Part of the difficulties people feel about the Trinity is, I think, tied up with what they think 'it' (and there is a problem with that pronoun to begin with!) is. People have fallen into the habit of thinking that the Trinity is only a 'doctrine' (even if they don't quite know what that word means), only a 'teaching' *about* God. But that tames and domesticates the Trinity, by turning it from something real and powerful into ideas. There was a technique that soldiers in both the first and second world wars used when shells fell near to them and remained unexploded. They'd give the bombs familiar names – 'Old Harry', for instance, treating them as old friends. In effect, that domesticated them, eliminating the terrible awareness that the bombs may blow up at any minute. For some people – perhaps for many – calling the Trinity 'doctrine' has just that effect; it is a way of domesticating it, allowing people to take it less seriously by treating it as only human ideas about God.

The reading we hear (or read for ourselves today) from Isaiah, as well as the psalm set, make it clear that the God we claim to worship isn't really a God we can 'domesticate': the vision Isaiah sees is too overwhelming – leading to an anguished cry 'Woe is me! I am lost'. And in the psalm we hear of the wonders and splendour and power of God, so that all are left to cry 'Glory!'

In today's gospel, however, we see what might be described as another attempt at 'domestication of God'. Nicodemus, a 'teacher of Israel' (who presumably, therefore, offers 'teachings' about God) comes to Jesus by night, and attempts to get everything nicely in order: 'Rabbi, you are a teacher who has come from God', so let's just sit

together and chat about the teaching you're offering. Or, at least, that seems to be how Nicodemus hopes the conversation will go. But Jesus, from the beginning, won't let Nicodemus settle into that comfortable kind of intellectual sparring back and forth. Every comment Jesus makes in this conversation is deliberately designed to unsettle and even provoke Nicodemus. Jesus seems to be saying, all your tidied up ideas or teachings about God have to be blown away by the wind that 'blows where it chooses', or is 'mighty upon the waters'. And Jesus identifies this wind as the Spirit of God, the one that brings new birth: and the actions of that Spirit will only be possible to understand through another action of the same Spirit.

What we attempt to understand in and through the 'doctrine' of the Trinity is, by the grace of the same Holy Spirit, who (as John's gospel tells us later) will 'lead us into all truth', the truth revealed to us about the *very nature* of God. And that truth is primarily revealed to us in what we know of, and through, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This same truth is further revealed by the sending of the Holy Spirit onto the Church. In some ways, that is remarkably simple: and it is expressed well in that most famous of all Biblical verses. In Jesus, and by the Spirit, we know that God loves the world – and us as part of that creation. Indeed, God loves us in this way: God the Son comes to us, to be with us, to make his home with us, to be 'God with us' (as Matthew's gospel puts it in naming him 'Emmanuel'). Just as, we might say, God's love overflowed into creating a universe of splendour and delight, so it overflows above all in sending God's own self into that creation so that the eternal communion that exists *within* God, is able to overflow and catch up those created things that are outside God, or 'in the world'. So, it is a world that is not to be condemned but saved.

And St Paul makes clear that it is the Spirit of God that comes upon and within us, and enables us to speak with God in exactly the same way that Jesus spoke with God while on earth: calling God 'Abba! Father!' And, as Paul also says, that means that God *within us* joins in with our own spirits to speak with God. In other words, we are made able to participate in the conversation that goes on *within God*. To put it another way, the love song that God continually sings to God now becomes a song we can sing along with.

What the 'doctrine of the Trinity' attempts to put into words is that, the life of Jesus, and the work of the Spirit within the Church shows us something that is eternally the nature of God. It isn't that God decides, at some point before the first century of the common era, that God will 'become three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. If this really is the eternal God, then God has been like this eternally (obviously!). So, in Jesus and by the Spirit, we are invited to join in with this eternal communion. That is, in a way, rather comforting given our inability to meet physically today. It shows that, by baptism and the gift of the Spirit, we are united to the eternal God and one another eternally. So, if we have to go for a week, or two, or however long, while that may be a difficulty for us while we remain 'in the flesh' (as Paul puts it) ultimately, it is only a brief blip in time. To be a community of faith, a people who gather in the name of Jesus Christ means we, too, must live into that eternal communion of love, grace, forgiveness, peace.

The 'pouring out' of grace, love, and forgiveness that we recognise in God the Holy Trinity shows a God who will not – cannot – remain 'shut up' in God's self. And that has implications for the Christian community, with those who identify themselves as followers of that Jesus and empowered by his Spirit. We daren't remain 'self-enclosed', even if we are, occasionally, self-isolated: we must be as open, as out-pouring, as full of grace, love, mercy, forgiveness, abundance as is the God whose Spirit blows where it will and makes us God's children. We must remain open to God's out-poured Holy Spirit, so that our lives – both as persons and as a community – can be as open and committed to the world in which we live as is the God we claim to worship, know, love, and serve. Like Isaiah, we can't help but say, 'Here am I: send me' into that world, as witnesses.

You see, the 'doctrine' of Holy Trinity is a way we have of describing the very being of the Triune God who is *for us* and for the whole world. And, in our prayers now from wherever we are and, when we can, as we go forth into the world God loves, we need to be willing to share a vision and the reality of that eternal communion as widely and abundantly as the God who is *for us*: the God who lives eternally in and as communion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.