



ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Trinity Sunday

30th May 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

May I speak in the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

That's a slightly different introduction to the sermon from usual, though it's one that many preachers use. The reason for choosing it today is that this is Trinity Sunday, the day on which the Church reflects on the nature of God, when we give thanks for the different ways we encounter God in our lives.

Last week I was invited round by a friend who has been a lifelong Christian. She admitted that she found the concept of the Trinity difficult to understand and it seemed to be causing her some anxiety. People often have a sense that the Trinity is complicated, and that even in asking such a question they are letting themselves in for a lesson about the complex discussions of the early church as it worked out the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I tried to reassure

my friend of three things: first, that the Trinity is not something we should expect to understand fully this side of heaven; secondly, that it is best approached instinctively rather than rationally, through the imagination; and thirdly, that it is sometimes easier to approach through art than language.

It is true that we experience God in different ways. First, as transcendent and mystical, the ground of all that is. We may encounter this aspect of God in a breath-taking sunset, or a tiny but perfectly formed flower, or a heart-stopping piece of music. A mystery sometimes referred to as 'the beyond in the midst'. The poet Wordsworth wrote this¹:

'... And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air...:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.'

The experience of God as Creator.

Secondly, we experience God in relationship – most obviously, perhaps, when we fall in love, but also in the everyday familiarity of family and friends. Supremely we encounter this aspect of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the 'incarnate God' – reconciling, forgiving, freeing, whose wisdom and teaching have inspired unnumbered women and men through the centuries to live life to the full. God as Redeemer.

¹ William Wordsworth, *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798).

Thirdly, we encounter God as Spirit, the subject of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in our Gospel reading today. I referred to this last week in terms of the wind in our sails – a divine presence that can brush our cheek with gentleness or sweep us off our feet with its energy. God as Sustainer, Encourager.

This threefold encounter – our experience of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – is what gives us insight into the uniqueness of God. A God who is unity in diversity. A God who is ultimately about relationship, the reciprocity of love. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann called it: 'the great love story of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a divine love story in which we are all involved together with heaven and earth'.

As I suggested earlier, sometimes it is easier to approach the Trinity through art than through language. The picture you have at the top of your service sheets – Anton Rublev's icon of the Trinity, painted in the fifteenth century - shows three gentle, elusive presences inviting us into their communion. The Trinity expresses the dynamic, relational nature of the love that infuses the divine life – outward facing, spontaneous, overflowing to the creation and seeking its participation in return; a love that is self-surrendering (on the Cross) yet overwhelming in its power (as revealed in the Resurrection). The Trinity also helps us to find our true place in the world. For there is a space in front of the table for us. If we look closely, we notice that the table at which the figures are seated is shaped like a chalice, reminding us that it is through the Eucharist that we experience and respond to this invitation liturgically.

That may all sound rather complicated. But at its heart it is actually quite simple. God is a ceaseless movement of perfect love. The lover, the beloved and the love that passes between them. A love which overflows into the creation, into us, to which we are invited to respond in love.

At this point I can hear some of my friends say: here we go again, 'it's all about love.' But, ultimately, I believe it is. Let me tell you three stories.

First, some years ago I knew someone who died while he was still young. He worked hard, and his hard work was rewarded by more work, more responsibility, more challenges. In the end he became so busy that he did not even have time to go to the doctor, until the pain he had been feeling became overwhelming and it was discovered he had cancer, which by then was incurable. He told me before he died that, at the end of it all, no one ever wished they had spent more time at work. What mattered was the quality of the relationships they had had, the love they had given and received.

The second story is from the church where I used to worship before I was ordained. It used to organise a parish weekend in the summer. One year an erudite speaker came along to give a lecture. I can't now remember what the lecture was about. What I do remember is how, when the speaker got near the end of the talk, a 91-year old woman in the congregation stood up, walked to the front and interrupted the speaker with a passion that belied her years: 'This is all very well, but you haven't mentioned *love*. The Gospel is about *love*.' I can see her now, and it always makes me smile. For she was right. He hadn't, and it is.

The last story is an apocryphal one about St John the Evangelist, the author of the Fourth Gospel and the letters of John we have been reading over the Sundays since Easter, with their insights into the nature of God. One day, one of his followers came and said: 'Why is it that you always write about love? Why don't you ever write about anything else?' St John paused, waiting for his disciple to work out the answer. Finally, he answered the question. 'Because', he said, 'in the end, there isn't anything else. There is only love.'

Love, relationship, is what lies at the heart of God. And we are sent out to proclaim it, however inadequate we may feel to the task, as we heard in our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning ('I am a person of unclean lips'). 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" We might look around and hope that someone else will answer that question. We might look around for quite a while. But in the end the question is still hanging in the air, and we realise that it will hang there until each one of us finds the courage to answer: 'Here am I; send me.'

Amen.