

Trinity Sunday

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 27 May 2018

Readings: Isaiah 6 verses 1-8 and John 3 verses 1-17

Like most people, I have my favourite hymns. In the same way that a smell can be deeply evocative, some hymns remind me of significant events and occasions in my life. Other hymns speak powerfully to me about significant elements of the Christian faith and my experience of it.

One hymn that I turn to regularly is Frederick Faber's 'There's a wideness in God's mercy' (number 806) – especially when it is sung to the glorious tune, Corvedale. Brought up as a Calvinist in the early nineteenth century, Faber followed John Henry Newman into the Roman Catholic Church and the Oratory. Faber may demonstrate some sentimentality in this hymn, but he is, as Michael Hawn, an American Methodist scholar, notes, 'cheering on the soul, recognizing the troubles of life, and holding out the promise of a final homecoming.'

Dr Hawn compares this hymn to William Cowper's hymn, 'God moves in a mysterious way'. Cowper, another Calvinist, sees that God's sovereign power and understanding are far beyond human capabilities: 'God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain' - which Faber expresses thus: 'For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind.'

Which leads me to the focus of our worship today. This is Trinity Sunday.

Trinity Sunday is the Cinderella of the church's year. Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are the three great festivals, with their emphasis on the incarnation, on the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christmas and Easter are celebrated with presents and cards, special food and bank holidays. In some towns in the north of England, especially Lancashire, the Whit walks have remained an important part of the calendar. Pentecost, in days when we knew this festival as Whitsunday, used to have its own bank holiday, but the demands of the secular calendar turned the old Whit Monday bank holiday into the late spring holiday on the last Monday of May – which we will enjoy tomorrow.

Then comes Trinity Sunday. A day largely overlooked, even within the life of the church. Yet this day is the culmination of the months of fasting and feasting since Advent. On Trinity Sunday, we bring together all the different facets of the last six months. And we are launched into rest of the year until the cycle begins again in Advent.

This is the day when we stand in awe; the day when we glimpse, and celebrate, God.

The incredible significance of a direct encounter with God is evident in Isaiah's encounter with God when he is called to be a prophet, which we heard in today's Old Testament reading.

I wonder sometimes what happened to the people whom Jesus encountered during his ministry – did those whom Jesus healed stay faithful to him, or did they simply forget the encounter and the healing as life carried on?

One of the modern hymns that is, I suspect, much misunderstood is Sydney Carter's hymn, 'Lord of the dance'. The popularity of the tune leads to many requests for the hymn for marriage services. I usually introduce the hymn by explaining that the 'Lord of

the dance' is Jesus and that the hymn celebrates the ceaseless activity and the flowing movement of Jesus – almost, as it were (and please excuse the analogy if it isn't helpful), bouncing into people like a dodgem car, which changes the direction of travel of those it encounters.

The encounter which Nicodemus has with Jesus is life transforming for him. There is no doubt that his meeting with Jesus made a huge difference for Nicodemus. We meet him later in the gospels, when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in taking the body of the crucified Jesus and placing him in the tomb. Nicodemus knows that Jesus is part of God's life and activity, but he doesn't fully appreciate the significance of his opening question until Jesus turns his question upside down. Nicodemus is drawn deeper into the life of God as he listens to Jesus.

In the late night conversation that we have heard, Jesus invites Nicodemus to join in the dance of God's ceaseless activity; to wake up and to be 'born again' – to allow himself to experience a new and transforming experience of life. Jesus doesn't simply answer Nicodemus' questions or respond to what Nicodemus is thinking. Rather, Jesus invites Nicodemus, and us, to join in an entirely new way of living and relating, both to each other and to God. And the relationship with God is to be experienced in different dimensions – the personal engagement that Nicodemus is having with Jesus, a deep sense of the divine nature of God the Father and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus, in short, is invited to know God as Trinity – the three ways of knowing God who 'loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

The love of God is beyond our imagining, as God invites us into the wonder of his life and ceaseless activity – and draws us through the love of Jesus and the prompting of the Holy Spirit into the unchanging life of God.

Holy God, faithful and unchanging: enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth, and draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love, that we may truly worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.