

## Trinity Sunday: Joining in the Dance

**Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17**

'Woe is me! Woe is me!' Do I say this because it has fallen to me to preach on Trinity Sunday and the task eludes me? No, the cry of woe is not mine but that of a Jerusalem court prophet some 2,800 years ago.

'Woe is me! I am lost!' cries Isaiah, 'for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts!'

Well, if you really *have* seen the Almighty God, shouldn't you *rejoice*, not cry 'Woe'? But Isaiah is terrified because he knows that no-one can see God and live. For God is holy, transcendent, incomprehensible, invisible.

And this vision of Isaiah is almost the only time in all the Hebrew Bible when anyone is said to 'see God'. Even the great Moses could enter the divine presence only in the dark cloud on the mountain and eventually be permitted to see just the back of God. The great Elijah on the same mountain could only hear a still small voice.

Yet here in the temple is Isaiah, actually seeing 'the Lord sitting on a throne'. His whole account is markedly, scandalously *sensuous*. Not only does the prophet see God and God's throne and robe and retinue; he also *hears* the singing and the seraph's words and even 'the voice of the Lord [saying] "Whom shall I send...?"' And there is *touch* too, the touch of the live coal on his lips; there is *smell*, the scent of the incense that fills the house with smoke. And perhaps even *taste*, for doesn't the psalm from that same temple sing to God 'How sweet are your words on my tongue, sweeter than honey to my mouth'?

Shouldn't we be wary of such sensuality? Shouldn't we shun this talk of seeing or hearing or touching or smelling or tasting the all-holy God?

Our Muslim brothers and sisters famously ban any image of the one God. Although Allah has 99 names none of them can define him: he is beyond definition, beyond theology. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, God has a Name, but it is too holy to be uttered; and if you must talk of God then it is in stories rather than doctrines. There's an ancient *Christian* tradition too that we cannot truthfully say what God *is*, only what God *is not*; that it's impossible to picture or describe or even to speak of God without blasphemy.

Yet for the most part we Christians have been pretty free with such blasphemy; profligate with our picturing and our talk of God. And that is so because of the extraordinary claims – truly blasphemous to Jews and Muslims – that in the carpenter from Nazareth we have seen the face of God; that the divine Word has become human flesh; that the Spirit or breath of God is abroad in our world.

In a moment we shall say the Creed. Its words are the outcome of years of often bitter argument. They tell a story of God and declare a doctrine of God the Three-in-One. And if this were the bad old days of the Book of Common Prayer, today would be one of the thirteen days a year when we were required to recite instead the so-called Athanasian Creed – getting our tongues, if not our minds, round such statements as 'One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God; one altogether, not by confusion of substance but by unity of person', and belligerently declaring at the end, 'This is the Catholic Faith; which, except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved'.

What can we make of this threat? of this certainty? of this whole doctrine of Trinity?

Our creeds, and the arguments that underlie them, can actually obscure *the utter simplicity of Trinity*. Simplicity, and utter glory, grounded in the realisation that no one name and no one person can express God for us; for we have sensed God as origin of all that is – but also as present in the flesh in Jesus Christ – but also as life and energy pervading all creation.

'Father, Son and Spirit': those are the traditional names. But really the names, the nouns, don't matter much. It is the *verbs* that count – those curious words like 'being' and 'begetting' and 'proceeding'. For these all speak of relationship and above all of *movement*.

That's why our celebration of Trinity Sunday comes straight after *Pentecost*, the feast of the infinitely mobile Spirit. That's why today we hear Jesus speaking of 'the wind that blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes'. For God is ceaseless movement, ceaseless energy; not a hierarchy, but a *dance*. A dance of three persons – or perhaps more than three ...

Modern physics has revealed that what we thought of as solid matter is in fact a ceaseless dancing of atoms, and within the atoms a ceaseless, apparently random, bouncing of electrons – with photons and neutrinos tumbling around as well, if I've got it right. Doesn't this wild movement somehow reflect and derive from the unseen Creator?

Yes, it is that energetic trinitarian dance that enacts and sustains our universe. What Jesus calls 'entering the kingdom of God' is our invitation to *join in* the dance, so that the being and begetting and proceeding extend beyond trinity into multiplicity. For God became man, the early Christian teachers said, so that we might become divine. If we are to 'be born of water and Spirit', as Jesus puts it, then we cannot stay still by the wall: no, hear the music and take to the floor.

Dancing is of course quintessentially sensual, even more so than Isaiah's vision. And perhaps heaven is less like a temple than a night club (or, if you want to be more genteel, a ballroom). A life where all our senses – our seeing and hearing and smelling and touching and tasting – all our senses, and all our thinking too, are expended in praise of the Holy Trinity. I read from St Patrick's Breastplate a fortnight ago celebrating Ascension. Here is the final verse:

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.  
Amen.

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