

Trinity Sunday 2019

Readings

- Isaiah 6.1-7
- Psalm 29
- Revelation 4.1-11
- John 16.5-15

Opening

I once had a mentor who said that he learned to preach without notes as a young man because his hands shook too much while he held his manuscript. He was terrified by the awesomeness of proclaiming the Word of God. He told me that story when he was in his 80s and said the fear never left him.

Maybe more than any other Sunday of the year, I step into this pulpit with fear and trepidation. I pray for the holy fear my mentor knew every Sunday of the year, but it's especially present when we meditate on God the Holy Trinity. Isaiah was undone when he saw the Lord enthroned in the Temple, John's vision of the heavenly throne was awesome in holiness. How can I describe the indescribable without diminishing the Holy? Or worse, how can I speak at all without falling into error about God's awesome nature?

Well, I may be the one speaking in the pulpit, but this whole space is holy, so all of us ought to come to this mystery with humility and awe. So I extend to you the same invitation St Augustine offered his readers when he composed *On the Trinity*. Augustine wrote,

Dear reader, whenever you are as certain about something as I am go forward with me; whenever you hesitate, seek with me; whenever you discover that you have gone wrong come back to me; or if I have gone wrong, call me back to you. In this way we will travel along the street of love together as we make our

way toward him of whom it is said, 'Seek his face always.'¹

Such good and wise guidance from our ancient father in the faith. I will quote several saints this morning. It's one of the best safeguards from error and foolishness. The jury is still out on me, but the saints have 2,000 years of credibility.

'Seek his face always.' 'Travel along the street of love together,' St Augustine says. We are seeking God, who is a communion of perfect love among three Persons. Which means God is not an idea. 'God is one, but not alone,' Hilary of Poitiers said. We are not pursuing *ideas* about God. God is Word; God is Spirit, but God is not an *idea*. Ideas are concepts I deliberate in my head. I accept or reject ideas. But I'm not created in the image, or redeemed, or loved by *ideas*. I'm created in the image and redeemed by one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is Love Eternal; who loves you and me beyond what we can ask, think, or imagine.

Trinity Sunday is a day to encounter, to experience our personal God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Isaiah wrote what he *saw* and *experienced*. John wrote the *vision* he experienced when he was *in* the Holy Spirit. And what Isaiah and John experienced and saw was the awesomeness of God.

Five Finger Orthodoxy

Now theology matters, of course; orthodoxy is essential. But this is a good moment to remember the very definition of orthodoxy. The literal definition of 'orthodoxy' is 'right praise.' We tend to import a meaning of orthodoxy that it means right *thinking* about God, to have the correct ideas about God. Yes, orthodoxy *does* mean robust, right thinking about God in communion with the saints. But one can express orthodox ideas about God and miss the heart of worship. You can speak with all knowledge and miss the personal experience of God in his heart. Theology matters, but theology is more a matter of the heart than the mind. The early Christian monk, Evagrius Ponticus, said, 'If you are a theologian you will pray truly; and if you pray truly you are a theologian.'

We could explore a number of aspects on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but I prefer to keep the core doctrine very simple. I want a way of confessing the Trinity that preserves the mystery, that guides me in prayer, that is simple enough to teach a child.

¹ St Augustine, *The Trinity*, 1.3.5.

So I've adapted on older custom of teaching the Sign of the Cross to teach simple, prayerful orthodoxy about the Trinity. It's a simple prayer, a physical prayer, that I've taught my children. It's what I like to call five finger orthodoxy.

God is Father, Son, Holy Spirit, the Three in One
Jesus is fully God and fully Man, with nail prints in his hands

And this is the shape of your hand when you make the sign of the cross. You can also call it five finger evangelism, because it's a simple way to proclaim the Gospel of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.

Sure, you can make the sign of the cross with the blade. It's not wrong. But the five finger shape is orthodox theology *and* evangelism.

Isaiah Before the Throne

Here is orthodox, Trinitarian theology in a simple, rhyming prayer, that will lead you into the presence of God, to 'seek his face always' as Augustine said. If there is a single goal of the Christian life, it is this: to *see* God and worship him in the beauty of holiness. 'How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord,' the psalmist prayed. 'For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.'

But it is an awesome thing to come into God's presence. Ask Isaiah. Isaiah saw the Lord seated upon his throne in his temple, he heard the voice of the Lord speak, the foundations of the temple shook, and Isaiah said, 'Woe is me! For I am lost!'

Isaiah may have been God's man, God's prophet, but he did not realize how blind he was to the beauty of holiness. He was a lost man, but this was where he belonged. But he wasn't prepared to dwell there.

To say Isaiah became self-conscious would be a great misjudgment. He was undone. He became aware of how unholy his speech was, how *unlovely* his whole people were. 'I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; *for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.*' There it is again—the vision of God.

But Isaiah wasn't strong enough, pure enough, to behold this kind of beauty. It was like staring directly into the sun. Isaiah heard the angels sing 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord' and he knew he wasn't holy like the Lord. Only the mercy of God makes it possible for Isaiah to remain in the presence of God.

John Before the Throne

Ask John what it's like before the throne of God, too. The Spirit opened the door of heaven for John to witness the unceasing worship around the throne of God. It doesn't get more visually stunning than John's vision of the throne room: jasper, carnelian, emerald rainbows, golden crowns, lighting flashes, peals of thunder. The same song Isaiah heard continues in John's experience of heaven: 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'

Such awesome visions of God, but what does it all mean? Why does this vision, this beauty surpass all beauty and glory on earth? Because God is Perfect Love. And what was veiled for Isaiah and John's eyes has been revealed because the Holy Spirit guided the Church into all truth—God is Perfect Love in Three Persons. That is the radiance of God's majesty, power, and glory. Heaven cries 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty' in an unceasing anthem because God is unceasing, perfect love in the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That's what we're made to witness. That's the vision we desire. A real *vision* of perfect Love. This is the power and glory of God—perfect, unceasing Love for one another. Christos Yannaras says the beauty of the Trinity is this reality: *the life of one becomes the life of the other; their Existence is drawn from life as communion, from life which is identified with self-offering love.*²

God's own inner life, his very nature, shared among the Three Persons is to gaze toward the other persons. The next time you look at the Icon of the Trinity (displayed in the Narthex), look at the tilting heads of each Person. The gaze is turned outward; their heads are tilted at an angle toward one another, signifying love and self-offering.

This is the mystery of Love Jesus revealed when he spoke of his Father and the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. 'All that the Father has is mine' Jesus said. 'It is better that I go away, for then the Helper will come.' 'The Spirit will glorify me. He will take what is mine and declare it to you.'

You can't get your mind around it. You can't comprehend it. But *comprehending* the Trinity has never been a prerequisite to *worshipping* the Trinity. See how they love one Another. See how they glorify one Another. The life of one is the life of the other. There is no other life besides this life. There is no life in God that is *not* self-offering love. 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.'

² Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, 36.

Made in the Image of the Trinity

Heaven also cries ‘who was, and is, and is to come.’ This is the most urgent vision we need for the days ahead, the vision of God’s beauty. I find it fascinating that John hears the voice of Jesus addressing him, saying ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ John was chosen to be a prophet of what was coming. But before Jesus shows John future events, he leads him to the throne room.

In Revelation 1-3, Jesus has just spoken the words of blessing, correction, and encouragement that John must share with seven churches in Asia Minor who live under persecution. Jesus will reveal to John a vision of the last things in earth; of war in heaven; of the New Jerusalem. But before John witnesses *what must take place*—war in heaven, the fall of nations, and all the rest—where does Jesus take him first? The throne room of God, where the Lord dwells in the beauty of holiness. Where God dwells in a communion of Perfect Love among three Persons.

God pulled the veil of heaven back (remember Ascension Sunday?) and invited Isaiah and John to see the glory of God. Why? Because Isaiah and John were called to be prophets, or the really old biblical word, *seers*. Yes, to see God as He is enthroned in the glory of Love, is to see the world rightly.

Our eyes have been so darkened and so accustomed to a world that has rejected the love of God. It’s a topic for another day, but I think back on human history and it seems to me you can understand our worst moments as a human race from generation to generation based on these two common threads:

- Glorifying and loving ourselves to the harm of others
- Treating persons as things rather than persons bearing the divine image of the Trinity.

Wars, genocide, abortion, slavery, and oppression—these are the consequences of blinding our eyes to the divine image that a Trinitarian God of Perfect Love created us in his image. G.K. Chesterton famously said that original sin is the only part of Christian theology that can really be proved. I would go one step further: the history of our ancestral sin is proof we have desecrated the image of God who is Perfect Love—in ourselves, in one another, in God’s world.

For the Life of the World (to Come)

Yes, there are troubling things that will take place in days to come, but let not your hearts be troubled. We have the Holy Spirit—the Helper—dwelling within us. ‘Seek his face always.’

Later today, tomorrow, this week you will be bombarded with headlines that will simply confirm the sad refrain, in one fashion or another, that we betray and desecrate persons by treating them as things. How much of your vision is shaped by headlines?

Trinity Sunday may be the best time to lift your eyes to heaven. You cannot see the world rightly unless you experience the awesomeness of God who is Perfect Love. Elevate your vision Godward. Confess to him your blindness, your unruly ego that would treat persons as things. Then come to the Lord in the Scriptures. Read Isaiah's encounter with the Holy. Read John's testimony inside the Throne Room. Invoke the Name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and ask that you would see more of his beauty with the eyes of your heart.

Come to him in silence. He comes to those who seek his face; he reveals his truth and beauty to those who wait. We are the Church of Jesus Christ, we are his *seers*, people who see God, who see persons, who see this world with the eyes of love and beauty.

You know where his eyes are turned—toward you. We have been adopted and welcomed into this divine Family. So let us turn our eyes toward Him because *we become what we see repeatedly*. And looking to Him constantly, we will walk the streets of love both in this life and in the life to come to the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.