

## John 3:1-17 (Jesus teaches Nicodemus)

Isaiah 6:1-8

7<sup>th</sup> June 2009

It's Trinity Sunday and I have a confession to make. In 5 years of ministry I have managed, almost entirely successfully, to avoid preaching on Trinity Sunday – until this year. I've booked holidays, invited guest preachers, and used every excuse in the book. So today is my comeuppance – no more excuses.

I'm the only preacher who dreads Trinity Sunday. How many have grappled with this doctrine and come out of the encounter not much wiser? How many have searched for metaphors of three leaved-clovers or water-ice-steam, to explain the inexplicable nature of God? In fact, for all but the best minds in the history of the world, the doctrine of the Trinity remains a mystery, as does the nature of God for most of us, if we're honest. Like Nicodemus in our gospel reading, we try to understand God, but are usually 'in the dark' about it all.

Well, depending on your frame of mind, you can either be disappointed or relieved that I'm not going to give you a deep theological treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity this morning. Neither am I going to talk about three leaf-clovers. I'm going to talk about relationship, because that's who God is, in simple terms. Community is at the very heart of God's nature, that's what the apparently dense and complex doctrine of the Trinity tries to articulate. Many people have tried to express it, and focusing on their work can help us to engage more deeply with who God really is. So I commend to you two very different expressions of God as community and suggest that you might spend some time with either one of them if you want to draw closer to who God really is. The first is an icon by Rublev that depicts God as three persons sitting at a table, with the fourth place, facing the onlooker, is open. The second is in this book – *The Shack* – which has become quite popular recently. It's a very different, and to some people a shocking portrayal of God. But a bit of a shock sometimes helps to jolt us out of the old familiar territory enough to see something afresh, so give it a try. In this story, God is depicted as a large African-American Mamma, a Middle-Eastern labourer and a small Asian woman who's there, but not quite there. And when Mack, the person meeting God, asks: 'Which one of you is God?', all three in unison say, 'I am', and they invite him to join in their life. You see, if God is community and relationship, God is certainly not closed community or private relationship, but always open and inviting others to join, always welcoming and attractive.

There's another wonderful picture of God in our first reading. Isaiah sees the majesty and mystery of God and is completely overawed, so much so that his response is to feel totally sinful and unworthy, for himself and his whole society. At the sight of God, he says 'Woe is me! I am lost, 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!' Isaiah knows the great divide between himself and God, a divide that, he believes, cannot possibly be bridged. But God's response is not to remain aloof

and isolated with angels flitting to and fro singing of his holiness. God's response is to invite in. God cleanses Isaiah so that he can be included in the community of holiness that is God, so that Isaiah can also be included in God's great work of sharing his life with the world. God's being is about sharing his life; he shares with Isaiah; Jesus shares with Nicodemus; God chooses to share with us and with others, if we will join him.

When we gather together as we have this morning, why do we come? To worship, to experience something of God's mystery? Or for company? To recharge our batteries or to have a bit of peace in a hectic world? There are lots of reasons we gather. But the important thing is that we do gather together to experience God, in word, in bread and wine, in each other. God is community, and we are most truly complete when we are in community too. That's why it's so important that Christians gather every Sunday, and that we gather in small groups too, so that we build stronger relationships with each other. Sadly, in the west, we've almost forgotten that. One of the crosses the Enlightenment gave us to bear is individualism, the conviction that the individual is supreme, that we are one before God, answerable for ourselves alone. I suspect that's one of the reasons why our society is sinking to the depths it is, where the most important person is me, and if I can get away with something with nobody else finding out, that that's a morally defensible position – at least some of our politicians seem to think that. And we have been all too eager to condemn them for their selfishness, their greed, their deceit. Yes, there are many who have done wrong, who have been sucked in by the me-and-mine culture, but can any of you, or can I, honestly say that we haven't been seduced by the same selfishness and greed in our own context? Let s/he who is without sin cast the first stone!

The problem is that even when we gather together, this corrosive individualism tempts us to make our community exclusive. We don't intend it this way, but that's what happens. But much of the Christian world understands the truth that we are not isolated individuals, but people in community, that we depend on one another, that the words or actions of one person cannot be isolated from everyone else, that it's only when we live out of our relationship with each other and with God that we find fulfilment. Yes, of course God loves us as unique individuals, but we are not made to be alone, we are created to be together – read the creation story, or, if it carries more weight for you, read some social theory. We are creatures designed for social interaction and relationship, because God is relationship. And when we're tempted to think that our faith is a private matter, God breaks in to remind us that God is not about privacy and exclusive relationship, but inclusion and welcome. The message for Isaiah was not come and join the Trinity of God and we'll make it a cosy foursome. The message was 'who will go for us?'. The message for us is not, how can we make this church comfortable and safe; it is 'who will go for us?'

A few weeks ago, we did something very Godly. We built community by joining with the community and enjoyed ourselves at the May Fayre – hard work though it was. And the community has grown because of our work – this church community and the wider community

of Burghfield/Common. We shared a common goal, and worked together and we have grown closer to God because of it. And that's nothing new for this church. The building that stands next door is bricks-and-mortar proof of the power of community and working together to do something great to enhance the wider community. We are right to feel good about those things. But it doesn't end there. Relationship doesn't thrive if you don't spend time on it. We still have work to do and community to build, so that we stay focused outwards, like God, not inwards. We need to gather in small groups and on Sundays. We need to celebrate what we do to build community and search for new ways we can work with God here. So I'd like to challenge you to think about how you share God's life by building relationships, and thank God for those opportunities, and ask him to show you how you and this church can include others in God's glorious life. And come and tell me what God tells you so that we can share it together.

Gill