

Trinity Sunday 7 June 2009
Revd Susanna Pain

My sermon for this Trinity Sunday is very simple.

I invite you to reflect on the three readings set for today with the different glimpses they give into the nature of God.

I share a reflection from Alan Jones, the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco which speaks of the radical and challenging nature of God as communion. And I recount some of my experiences of God – mystery –

Earth maker
Pain bearer
Life giver ...

I wonder.

How do you experience God / the divine? God in community –

Speak to me, call me, email me. I'd like to know, what do you know?

Who supports you on this journey – what are your questions?

Trinity Sunday

Images of majesty, praise and call, in Isaiah's vision ending with: 'Who shall I send out and who will go for me?'

'Here I am, send me.' Then, a story of Jesus in John 3, filled with layers of meaning 'the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. A man, a leader comes at night to explore, to ask questions. He's not yet ready to be exposed by light.'

Born again, born from above...

What does it all mean? For God so loved ...that God gave God's son Jesus ... (John 3:16)

And in Romans 8 we read, we are adopted as God's children.

Trinity, 3 expressions, 3 persons, one God. This is mystery!

Alan Jones, from Grace Cathedral in San Francisco writes:

The doctrine of the holy and undivided Trinity is a doctrine about what it is to be human. Since we are made in the image of God, and God, according to Christians, is a communion of persons, what does that say about us? We sense that on one hand, we want to stand alone as free individuals, and on the other, we want to be in a freely chosen relationship with others. We want two things at once. We want individuality without domination from another. But we also want intimacy and community.

The doctrine of the Trinity – God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – developed as a way of putting into words the experience of the early Christians. They believed in one God, yet they experienced this God in Jesus as an ongoing presence in their lives. At the same time they were going through a change in the way they understood

themselves. Never before had anyone experienced what we now take for granted – what it is to be an individual. In fact, much of what we take as given about what it is to be human was hammered out in the first four centuries of the Christian era, as people tried to give voice to their experience both of Jesus as a lively presence still among them and of themselves as beings made in the image of God. St. Augustine's Confessions are significant in that they reveal the beginnings of a new way of reflecting on the self, and on the self in isolation. This is the self who is both radically unique and yet in communion with others.

God was clearly God, and yet God came to them in three ways that were distinct but not separate. They knew God as Creator. They'd met God in the flesh in Jesus. And after he was gone, they were aware of his all-pervasive Spirit: they encountered this living presence whenever they met together to break bread. At the same time, they reflected that they felt more truly themselves when they were in communion with God and with each other. They didn't feel less themselves but, like lovers, they felt more themselves when they were with people they loved. Out of this furnace of experience there emerged a dynamic and open understanding of God and of themselves – a doctrine of God that was always capable of revision.

Their experience brought new problems because it set the Christians on an adventure that is still going on, in spite of efforts of authoritarians to close it down. Their own humanity was being shaped by forces beyond their control. The Holy Spirit is wind and fire, elements that cannot be controlled or subdued. Imagine what it was like to reflect on the fact that a human being was made up of such elements. If we are made in the image of God, there is something about us that cannot be controlled, subdued, or enslaved. That's why questions about the Holy Spirit (in fact, questions about religion in general) are often questions about authority. Who gets to say what's what? Whose version of reality is the most accurate, and what are the consequences of our false choices? The name of the game is freedom, but we don't really want to be free. We want to control or be controlled, but the Spirit blows where it will.

Perhaps that's why the Church has been somewhat weak with regard to the life of the Spirit. It cannot and will not be controlled by synods, canons, and rubrics. The Church organizationally has often preferred to control rather than attract, dominate rather than invite, compel rather than win over. Human beings don't like the messiness of history, and in the name of efficiency they tidy up what resists rigid reorganizations. But Christianity is based on a lot of uncertainty about what can be known and controlled. All we have are pictures, and the mystery of wind and fire cannot be contained in them. This is nowhere more true than in our talking about God as Trinity. We are not dealing with definitions but with mysteries, and a dogma, properly understood, isn't the last word on a subject but the first – a starting point.

Excerpted from Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect your spirit without disconnecting your mind by the Very Reverend Alan Jones, retired dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. © John Wiley & Sons, 2004. Used by permission

In reflecting on Trinity, I find Rublev's wonderful Trinity icon helpful. It invites us in to the centre of this God who is community, dance, relationship.

I remember once many years ago, lying on the rocky ground of a chapel in Stroud, lying face down, feeling totally unworthy in the presence of an awesome God –

In my head I heard a voice say get up, “I love you as you are, get up and follow me...”

I was so surprised!

I got up...

Isaiah in his vision, resonates with this experience.

‘And I said: “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!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I, send me!”’ (Isaiah 6:5-8)

‘We are not dealing with definitions, but with mystery’ – and a call to relationship!