

A Holy Trinity of Grace

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 3 June 2012, by David Gill. Readings for Trinity Sunday were Isaiah 6:1-8 and St John 3:1-17.

Last Sunday was, for me, a special day: the 47th anniversary of my ordination.

In 1965, May 27th fell on a Thursday, which, that year, happened to be Ascension Day. I remember kneeling before the holy table of a small Congregational church in Melbourne while a dozen ministers – all in black, in those days – gathered around for the laying on of hands. The ordination prayer was said. I discovered that a dozen enthusiastic hands on one's head weigh a ton. The place had that typical churchy aroma – a subtle mix of ancient furniture polish, long ignored dust and old hymn books.

Most of all I remember two conflicting thoughts that, as I knelt there, were surging through my mind. One was: yes this feels right, this is what my life is for. The other was: what the hell is a guy like me doing in a situation like this? The contradiction, I confess, lives on in me, to this day.

And not only in me.

Many of us, I suspect, are spiritual schizophrenics, living in the apparent disconnect between two worlds. Whether you're young or old, a long time pillar of the church or someone returning after a long sabbatical from religion, there's a fair chance that you too know that ambivalence. On the one hand: yes, this faith community feels wonderfully right, this is home, this is where I belong. On the other hand: Help, get me out of here!

Isaiah felt the tension. We heard of his confusion in our first reading. The passage began with his great vision of divine glory. Significantly, he is in the temple, the holiest of places. The hem of God's robe – only the hem, mind you – fills the temple. The seraphim – mythical heavenly beings in attendance on God – must shield their eyes from the mystery. They sing words of awe which congregations big and small, all these centuries later, still echo in our great prayer of

thanksgiving as we approach the sacrament of holy communion: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”.

The passage ends on an equally upbeat note. God ponders “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responds enthusiastically “Here am I, send me!” Two high points. The heart of the drama, however, is to be found in what separates the two.

Isaiah’s opening vision of God leaves the prophet overcome with a sense of unworthiness, personal and communal too. “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!”

Note what happens next. Or rather what doesn’t happen next. Isaiah does not fall to his knees pleading for forgiveness. He does not seek absolution. He does not resort to one of Judaism’s rituals of cleansing. He does ... nothing. Maybe divine forgiveness just does not seem possible. Maybe he thinks he doesn’t deserve it, that his sin is unforgiveable. For whatever reason, he seems frozen, transfixed by the awesome contrast between God’s majesty that he has glimpsed and the human reality that he knows all too well. So, paralysis. He is stuck.

Enter God. One of the seraphim, the heavenly beings, takes a coal from the altar in the holy of holies. He touches Isaiah’s lips, and quotes from one of the temple’s rituals of forgiveness: “Your guilt has departed,” he announces, “and your sin is blotted out”. What Isaiah could not bring himself to ask for, what perhaps he did not imagine was even possible, he has received. A new beginning! And all through an initiative that lay entirely with God.

It was forgiveness unsought, mercy undeserved, acceptance unexpected, compassion unimagined, love unearned. It was sheer grace.

Our second reading this morning speaks of the same reality, but it presents us with two other images. This initiative-taking God, it suggests first, is like the wind: an elusive wind that mortals may sense but can never track, an unpredictable wind that blows where it chooses, a life-bearing wind that brings new birth from above.

This initiative-taking God, it suggests further, is like the strange man of Nazareth: meeting the questioning Nicodemus, caring about the poor and despised, living our life and dying our death, among us not to condemn but to give life.

And the transcendent reality that touches us in these three different ways – as Father, Son, Spirit -- is one.

Today, Trinity Sunday, has been in the calendar of the western church since the middle ages. It's not a day for rehashing the doctrinal debates of the early centuries about how the relations of the three persons of the Trinity are best understood. Nor is it a day for mathematical gymnastics aimed at demonstrating that $1+1+1=1$.

Every other Christian festival marks an event or a person in the salvation story. Today by contrast plunges us into the heart of the divine mystery, the very being of God. Trinity Sunday gathers up all that we've covered to date in the Christian year: the yearnings of Advent, the joy of Christmas and Epiphany, the solemnity of Lent, the sorrow of Holy Week, the triumph of Easter, the fireworks of Pentecost. Gathers it up and suggests what, through all of this, we have glimpsed of God.

What we have glimpsed speaks to the ambivalence that haunted me on that night forty seven years ago when I was ordained, the ambivalence that haunts many of us still. What on earth are we doing here? Why are flawed people like us in this holy place, preparing to receive this holy communion, seeking to serve this holy God?

Why? Because like Isaiah long ago, like those who encountered the man of the cross, like all whom the wind of God has touched, you and I are the astonished beneficiaries of that same forgiveness we have not sought, mercy we did not deserve, acceptance we never expected, compassion we could not imagine, love we could never have earned.

We too have been embraced by a holy Trinity of grace: sheer, amazing grace.

Thanks be to God!

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