

Trinity Sunday

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, Trinity Sunday, 25 May 2024

Isaiah 6:1–8; Psalm 29; Romans 8: 12–17; John 3:1–17

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When I tell people that I am preparing my sermon for Sunday, they sometimes ask, ‘What are you preaching about?’ Well, today let me tell you. I am preaching about GOD!

How do you understand God to be?

Everyone who identifies as either a Theist (God believer), an Atheist (person who believes there is no God) or an Agnostic (a person who is unsure as to whether God exists or not), must ascribe a meaning to the term ‘God’, because if they did not, they could not adopt the position they have.

The most recent (2021) Australian census indicated that the proportion of Australian people claiming they had no religion was in that year, almost 39 per cent and only 44 per cent claimed to be Christian.¹ The remaining people made up members of other religions – the largest of which was Islam at 3.1 per cent of the population. Two years earlier, in the 2019 Australian Community Survey, 60 per cent of Australians said that they believed in some sort of God, spirit, or life force. Only 29 per cent said they believed in a personal God and 32 per cent said they believed in some sort of spirit or life force.²

I wonder, which group of people do you fall in to? Are you among those 29 per cent of Australians who believe in a personal God, or do you stand with the 32 per cent of Australians who believe in ‘some sort of spirit or life force’?

Who or what is your God?

Today of course is Trinity Sunday when we affirm the teaching of the church that God is one, yet God is three divine persons. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Very often we ascribe each person of the Trinity a role:

The Father who created us.

The Son who redeemed us.

The Spirit who is ever present with us to be guide, teacher, advocate and sustainer.

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia> accessed 25 May 24

² <https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/australians-views-of-god-and-jesus/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%202019%20ACS%2C%20around%20six%20in%2010%20Australians,believe%20and%2018%25%20remain%20unsure.> Accessed 25 May 24

But what does that really mean? Why do we need to have a trinitarian doctrine of God?

Our Old Testament reading this morning from the prophet Isaiah presents an awe-inspiring vision of God. It uses words to convey some of the mystery of God:

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' (Isaiah 6: 1–3)

The Lord of hosts is holy. The whole earth is full of God's glory. It's true, isn't it, that for many people, the wonder and magnificence of the natural realm, of earth, sky and sea, of space and outer space point to a glorious God who, like the universe itself, cannot be fully comprehended.

This resonates with them in a way that they describe as 'spiritual'. Perhaps it resonates with you in this way.

In our Gospel reading today, we read again the story of the pharisee Nicodemus who went to see Jesus at night, presumably to try to get to know Jesus better. His observation was that Jesus must have come from God because in Nicodemus's view, no one could do the wonderful works that Jesus was doing, unless he had come from God. This idea of coming from God is itself incredibly curious. Nicodemus was clearly confused. He was an educated pharisee, but he didn't understand Jesus. Who he was, how he did what he did, was a mystery to Nicodemus. Jesus' response to his statement was curious:

"Truly, I tell you, no one can see God's kingdom unless they are born ἀνωθεν; [*anōthen* = again/from above]." (John 3:4)

Here is another mystery! How is a person born 'from above'?

As we saw in last week's sermon, using the metaphor of the wind, Jesus described spiritual birth in a person. We don't know where the wind begins or ends, but we know that it is blowing, so it is with those who are born from above. Jesus said such a birth is spiritual, not of the flesh. It comes when a person puts their faith in the One who would be lifted on the cross – Jesus himself.

Paul stated in our epistle reading from Romans Chapter 8:

When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Romans 8:15–17)

There is a mysterious spiritual encounter with the Holy Spirit and our spirit that bears witness that we are God's children. Another mystery! I wonder if this is your experience.

Reflecting on the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus, John declared that God is a God of love:

“God loves the world so much”, [Jesus said] “that everyone who puts their trust in the only begotten Son of God will not die [spiritually] but have everlasting life. Because God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him”.
(John 3: 16–17)

Without defining the trinitarian God, we see in this encounter the holy Trinity at work.

God the loving Father, the one from whom Jesus came, loves the entire world. He gave his only son, the One to be lifted up, through whom eternal life is found. God the Holy Spirit is the One through whom this new life ‘from above’ is given.

At the end of his ministry, just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his followers to go into all the world and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19). Here we see Jesus using a trinitarian formula, yet without defining what that meant.

I'm sure that you know that the term ‘Trinity’ does not appear anywhere in the Bible, nor was it found on the lips of Jesus. It was not until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD that the assembled Christian leaders of the time agreed to the doctrine as we have it today.

Despite this, throughout Scripture the mystery of our wonderful God is described, and the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is alluded to in so many ways that we can only conclude that God is one, yet God is three persons.

But do you know what? I might be accused of being a heretic when I say this, but I don't really think it matters if you can't get your head around the Holy Trinity. What is far, far more important is that you know that God is, and that God loves you, that you know the wonderful love of God that Jesus showed. It is far more important that you know Jesus died for you and for the whole world. It is far more important to know that God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in Spirit and in truth. It is far more important that you know that God cares about you, that God loves you. It is more important to know that God calls you to come to him, as you are, putting your faith in Jesus the Son who took upon himself the sin of the whole world so that we might know forgiveness of sin, newness of life and the ever presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we journey together with him.

Jesus said:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11: 28–30)

Amen.