

Trinity Sunday (Year B)

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

27 May 2018

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty. His royal robes spilled over the throne and filled the temple. The seraphim shouted his praises back and forth. The heavy doors of the temple shook on their massive hinges and the mystery of God's presence filled the house like a thick smoke. And Isaiah 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!

All over the Christian world, preachers are beginning their sermons today by saying that this is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the church year dedicated to a doctrine.

But they're wrong. Yes, this is Trinity Sunday, but today is not dedicated to a doctrine. The Trinity is not a doctrine. The Trinity is God. There is a doctrine *about* the Trinity, but the Trinity is not a doctrine. The Trinity is the everlasting communion of perfect love that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On Trinity Sunday we take our attention off the mighty works of God, pull open the curtain to the heavenly throne-room, and try, as best we can, to catch a glimpse of the Mighty Worker himself.

And that is why I started, as our readings start, with worship. Keep us steadfast in that faith and worship, we pray in our Collect—and I'll get to faith in a bit—but let's start with worship. We go with Isaiah into the heavenly throne-room, where the seraphim are engaged in their endless song of "Holy, holy, holy" —three times holy, and are we to say that it is an accident that it is three times, not two, not four? Are we to say that it is an accident that God asks "Whom shall I send?" —first person singular—and continues "Who will go for us?" —first person plural? The Christian tradition has said no, it is not an accident, but even in the earliest days, the mysteries of the God the One and Three were intimated, just hinted at, not as a theological conundrum that would burst on the scene later with a vengeance to confound theologians and confuse the faithful, but in the context of worship, of standing before God and trying, as best we can, to get a glimpse into the inner life of the God who, we profess, is love, and to stand in awe before the throne of grace.

God is love, we say, and what a testimony to that love we received from our Presiding Bishop at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex last weekend. But love exists only where there is reciprocity and community. And God is love whether he creates or not, whether we worship him or not, whether we acknowledge him or not. God is love, and so there must be in God some kind of reciprocity and community, and by his grace we acknowledge that community in the eternal, perfect, unstinting love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before the mountains were brought forth, before the land and the earth were born, from age to age, he is God, and God is love.

The heavenly worship that Isaiah allows us to enter should seem familiar. We too enter the presence of God; we acknowledge that we are joined by angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. We confess that we are people of unclean lips, and we receive the healing gifts that come from the altar, aglow with the fire of God's love, and accept the divine commission that sends us out to bear God's message to the world.

But look more closely at our worship, and you will see the Trinity, even at the altar. For in the priest Jesus sacramentally offers himself to the Father. Through the mystery of consecration and communion, the Holy Spirit descends, bestowing gifts of grace.

And the priest at the altar represents and incarnates the priesthood of the whole congregation, the priesthood of every one of us who has been baptized into the name of the Holy Trinity, born from above of water and the Holy Spirit. And each of us is a priest in this holy action, standing as Christ, offering himself in us, and us in himself, to the Father; and on each of us the Holy Spirit descends.

Keep us steadfast in that faith and worship, we pray—and I have talked about worship, so I need to talk about faith. Faith is not just intellectual assent. Faith, as Rowan Williams says in his wonderful book *Tokens of Trust*, is about where we take our refuge, where we find our home. When we say in the Creed “We believe,” that doesn't just mean, or even primarily mean, “We affirm it as a fact.” It means “We put our trust in this, we place our confidence in this; this is our home, our abiding-place, and we commit to the life that this trust and confidence demands of us and makes possible for us.”

And what are we putting our trust in when we say “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . . We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son . . . We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life”? Oh, so many things—so many that I have an entire fifteen-minute emergency backup sermon on just that topic—but let me choose just this one,

and perhaps the most important one. Faith in the Trinity is, above all else, trust in Jesus. Faith in the Trinity honors the Lord Jesus because it affirms that Jesus is who he says he is and does what he says he does.

Jesus spoke of God as his Father. Jesus identified himself very closely with the Father: “I and the Father are one,” he said, and “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” But he also spoke of the Father as someone different from him, who sent him and gave him all authority. He prayed to the Father and did, not his own will, but the will of the Father.

So if Jesus is who he says he is, he is God—the same God as the Father, but not the same person as the Father.

Jesus also promised that he would send us the Holy Spirit, another Comforter or Counselor or Advocate, who would be with us and lead us into all truth and help us understand everything that he taught. And this Holy Spirit must also be God, since who other than God can lead us into all truth? Who other than God could be another Comforter or Counselor or Advocate like Jesus?

Someone asked me on Facebook if I could summarize Pentecost in 140 characters or less. I thought about it for a bit, and then came up with this: “Jesus gives us a command that we can’t fulfill without divine power, and then he bestows the divine power to fulfill it, just as he promised.” If the Holy Spirit is not divine power, then the Holy Spirit is not the power we need, and not the power that Jesus promised. So the Holy Spirit is divine power—the Holy Spirit is God—and our Jesus is someone who keeps his promises.

So if Jesus does what he says he does, he send us God the Holy Spirit—the same God as the Father and the Son, but not the same person as the Father and the Son.

And so I say that our faith in the Trinity honors the Lord Jesus: it proclaims that Jesus is who he says he is and does what he says he does. In him we place our trust, in him we repose all our confidence, and by his promise we are equipped to lead the life that this faith demands of us and makes possible for us.

‘Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
just to take him at his word.
Just to rest upon his promise,
just to know, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him!
How I've proved him o'er and o'er!
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust him more!

So we turn next to professing that faith, and then we enter that worship, bringing our prayers before the heavenly throne, confessing that we are people of unclean lips, receiving God's forgiveness, and with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven looking on, the saving work of the Holy Trinity is re-presented for us and by us, and we are empowered to go forth and carry out the commission Jesus has laid upon us.

And so to the source of all our goods and the goal of all our desires, to God the Holy and Undivided Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*