



Trinity Sunday
Sunday 31 May 2015

Here, There and Everywhere

A sermon by Revd Will Morris

Readings: Isaiah 6.1-8; Romans 8.12-17; John 3.1-17

Why Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night we are never told. Perhaps as a respectable man, a “teacher of Israel”, he didn’t want to be seen with the radical preacher? Perhaps he was so busy as “a leader of the Jews” this was the only time he had? Perhaps it’s as much metaphorical as literal? A general comment on the benighted state of Israel’s religious leadership, by a Gospel writer who loved the contrast between day and night; light and dark; good and evil? But I’ll suggest one more. A metaphor more personal to Nicodemus: night as confusion, a time when it is difficult to see clearly or far. Nicodemus, steeped in the Law of Moses, has a very clear picture of the Father. But even though he, too, awaits the Messiah, he does not see the Son of God who stands in front of him. And then the Messiah, the Son, confuses him still further by talking about the Spirit. “What do you mean?” Nicodemus keeps asking. “How can that be?” Jesus, Rabbi: “What do you mean?”

Could we ever be confused like Nicodemus? We probably feel we have a pretty good grasp on who the Father is, regardless of whether we view him as an old man with a white beard, or as the Creator God of the Book of Genesis, or as the transcendent, unknowable source of all that that ever has been and ever will be. And likewise, we probably feel that we also have a pretty good grip on the Son, born in a stable in Bethlehem, preacher and healer in Galilee, crucified in Jerusalem, risen from the dead, and now ascended. The Spirit is perhaps a little more difficult, because it is never seen, never heard; nothing concrete, other than the occasional dove descending, or tongues of flame at Pentecost. But we go with the flow. Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three in one, and one in three. Repetition makes it familiar, comfortable, understood. So, we’re not confused, not baffled like Nicodemus. Right? Well, let’s see. Because on Trinity Sunday, instead of focussing on just one, we have to focus on all three at the same time. And suddenly the tricky, interesting, critical question is not do we know the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, but, rather, why is it Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Why three? What is about those three, and the way they interact, that means without them God would not be God? Putting in another conjunction, that first “and”, gives rise to questions not raised by the more familiar phrase we have repeated thousands of times.

To answer why Father and Son and Holy Spirit I want to pair it with another threesome: “here, there, and everywhere”. Because to understand the Trinity we need not only to understand the interaction of the Father and the Son, but also the interaction of both with the Holy Spirit. A God who is Father and Son, both up there and down here, immanent and transcendent, is not quite two-dimensional, but is certainly rather vertical, two points in a hierarchy. Here and there has an almost static, almost human, sound to it – and that our God most definitely is not. So what brings movement into this relationship, what brings that third dimension is the addition to “here” and “there” of that third word “everywhere”. Because that’s what the Spirit is, what the Spirit does. The Spirit by being everywhere fills the gap that might otherwise open up between the all-powerful, all-seeing transcendent God the Father up there, timeless and outside of time; and God the Son who was with us two thousand years ago, who walked on earth, lived among us, and died on a cross of wood. The role of the Spirit who is everywhere, is to make the one God whole.

But what does that really mean? It’s difficult to capture in words something almost beyond our human comprehension. Jesus says to Nicodemus: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ... 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." Part of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that to truly understand this mystery, to understand God, you must open yourself to something you cannot understand, cannot see, cannot hear, cannot feel, cannot measure, cannot predict, cannot control. We feel most comfortable with God when we can picture him, almost photographically, as the Son trudging the roads around Galilee, or as the Father, seated in heaven on the throne of thrones. But God the Spirit – as Jesus tells Nicodemus – simply cannot be captured in a human snapshot, or explained logically. The Spirit can only be felt, experienced.

So I want to try something a little different. I was seventeen when I first read Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, and there is a passage that entranced me then, and has held me ever since. Young Cathy and Linton are arguing over their perfect July day. For Linton it is quiet and gentle; warm sun, a cloudless sky, and larks singing overhead. For Cathy, though, it's different: "Mine," she says:

Mine was rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright white clouds flitting rapidly above; and not only larks, but throstles, and blackbirds, and linnets, and cuckoos pouring out music on every side, and the moors seen at a distance, broken into cool dusky dells; but close by great swells of long grass undulating in waves to the breeze; and woods and sounding water, and the whole world awake and wild with joy. He wanted all to lie in an ecstasy of peace; I wanted all to sparkle and dance in a glorious jubilee. I said his heaven would be only half alive; and he said mine would be drunk: I said I should fall asleep in his; and he said he could not breathe in mine.

In a few words Bronte allows me to feel – in a way that whole books of theology could never do – to feel the here, there and everywhere of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. The disparate parts and actions coming together to constitute the one, living, dynamic God. The Spirit is the wind that surrounds Cathy, giving life and motion to all around her and filling her with joy. From the trees under which she sits that are rooted in the earth on which the Son walked, to the clouds scudding high above that touch the heavens that the Father created, the wind is the Spirit that links everything. The Spirit is the sound of joy, the song of larks and throstles, linnets, blackbirds and cuckoos, carried everywhere on that wind. The Spirit creates those cool dusky dells far away, but also makes the swells of long grass nearby undulate in waves. The Spirit is near and far, up there with the Father, and down here with the Son. And what the Spirit does is, in Bronte's words, to make the "whole world awake and wild with joy" as the Spirit and the Father and the Son are joined in a constantly changing, constantly moving unity. If we try to capture the Trinity in a human image, or pin the Trinity down in dusty theological explanation, then like Nicodemus, like young Linton, our heaven will be "only half alive" and we will be "asleep" in the darkness that is night. But if like Cathy we are open to the Spirit, to the life and movement it creates around us, to the life and joy it creates inside us, then we, too, may "sparkle and dance in a glorious jubilee" in the midst of the light. The Spirit of God, blowing where it chooses, connects us with Father and Son, up there and down here, near and far, everywhere, one God. Our God, who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.