

Trinity Sunday – 11 June, 2017 – St Paul’s Manuka.

Preached by: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas

Exodus 34: 1-8

Song of the Three Young Men

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13

Matthew 28: 16-20

This year, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s act of nailing his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. These 95 theses summed up some of the objections that Luther had to the work of the church of his day and have been seen by many as the start of the Reformation. I noticed in the media the other day that a church in Germany is celebrating this anniversary with the production of a robot clergy person. Apparently the robot has flashing lights and makes all sorts of noises. It has hands which light up as it holds them up and pronounces blessings. You can even press a button on the robot’s chest and it gives you a print out of the blessing. I wonder what Martin Luther would have made of this.

It seems to me that having a robot priest is a big problem since there can be no relationship between the robot and the people to whom it ministers. Perhaps this robot has taken the life and relationship out of the encounter. This is exactly the case we sometimes have with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the feast which we celebrate today. The words we use to describe the Trinity do not always match up with our experience of the God who chooses to be revealed as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Sometimes when we use words to describe the nature of the Trinity, the life and relationship of God working amongst us is completely lost.

For most of us the language of the Trinitarian formula, talking of one substance and three persons in one God is a type of language which fails to communicate. It fails to give us the relationship we seek. One reason for this is that this language comes from a philosophical system that is no longer used. This does not mean however that we should abandon any talk of the Trinity. What it does mean is that we need to speak about the Trinity in a way that better reflects our experience of God who works as Father, Son and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. This is what we find in the Bible. The Bible speaks to us of God who created the world and everything in it as an act of love and care, where the generosity of God was given to the creation – us included. When we read the creation myth in Genesis we also read of the word or logos being present with the Father in the act of creation. We understand that word or logos to be God the Son who was present from the beginning of all time. We

also hear of the Spirit hovering over the creation and forming it. This is a dynamic and alive event, not a stale definition. In the New Testament we see Jesus living and working among people and showing them the Father – letting them know what God is like since he was God. We see too the Spirit descending on the disciples at Pentecost and enlivening them for ministry in the world. Again this is not a stale definition but a living relationship.

The essence of Christianity and our experience of God cannot be boiled down to a formula of words with the real and living experience of God drained off. The mistake we make in trying to teach a child, or adult for that matter, the doctrine of the Trinity is that we start from the formula and not the experience.

If we think about that for a moment we may realise that most of the great truths we discover in life and faith come from our experience of one another and of God, not from prefabricated and imposed linguistic formulas. These formulas have a place but they are not where we start.

Love is a very good example of what I am trying to say. We do not learn to love another person from a book or from a formula, but rather from the experience we have of that person in relationship. We respond to tenderness and care and we return the gift to the other person. In so doing we experience the depth of another person's feeling for us and come to know they love us. We do not come to love someone by writing an academic treatise on that other person.

Truth about God and God's love for us begins with the experience of a life of faith, not from doctrine. We know God as the Holy Trinity when we experience relationship with God and as we know the three persons of the Trinity in relationship with one another. Doctrine only makes sense when we try to bring our experience of the truth of our relationship with God into clearer focus.

It seems to me that the truth of the Trinity is found in the experience we have of a God who creates us and continues to recreate us in all our giftedness and brokenness. The truth of the Trinity is found in the power of the salvation we have as a free gift through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ our Lord, as Christ works in our lives. The truth of the Trinity is found in the sustaining, strengthening and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit working in us and gifting us for ministry and life. The truth of the Trinity is found in the dynamic of

relationship between the persons of the Trinity and as we experience that power in our own lives.

If we are to learn anything about the power of the Trinity then a good place to start is the life of the God and the lives of people and the way God works in the world and in our lives. We should look to the places where God is revealed and know the power of that in our lives and in the lives of others.

God has chosen to create the world and everything in it, including us. God has chosen to continue that work by continually renewing the face of the earth and the lives of people. Deep down in the mind and heart of God we know that we are held, not by a formula of words but by a relationship which is loving, reliable and trustworthy.

God has chosen to be revealed to us through the person of Jesus. It is in and through Jesus that we know what God is like. It is through Jesus that we are brought back to God as an act of love. Through Jesus God has done away with death and brought us new life. It is in this person Jesus that we see God in the flesh and know Jesus' presence week by week in the Eucharist. It is in Jesus that we see God exposed and it is through Jesus that we experience God's love in the ultimate sense.

God has chosen to be revealed to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that God strengthens and sustains us, heals us in body, mind and spirit and spurs us on to live in love in the way God wants us to live. It is through the Holy Spirit that a person discovers self and is caught up into the life and power of God. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are made more Christlike.

The truth of the Trinity is not a set of words or a formula but a lived experience of God – a relationship God initiates and sustains as we respond.

The experience of the Trinity is one of relationship – relationship between the three persons and with us as the dynamic of Father or Creator, of Son or Redeemer and of Holy Spirit or Sanctifier works through love. These are all experiences of the one God – not three. Here in this unity in diversity is the truth and experience of God, creating us, redeeming us and sanctifying us. It is only in the context of that relationship that a formula of words makes any sense.

God is not a robot, devoid of relationship. God the Trinity is with us creating us, redeeming us and giving us comfort – alive and dynamic. Thanks be to God the Trinity.