



Revd Ro's Reflection on Trinity Sunday

Romans 8. 12-17

John 3. 1-17

Last year when I wrote my reflection for Trinity Sunday the gospel set was from the end of Matthew, the passage which has come to be known as 'The great commission.' I remember that passage particularly because when I was about nine it was part of our Sunday school exam –yes we had exams in those days. I remember having to learn it and we then had to reproduce it in the exam. It was a very appropriate passage to set for Trinity Sunday as it contains these words.

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ^{28.19}Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ' Obviously it is called 'The great commission' because it is the command that Jesus left his followers, to take the word of God to all nations. This must be one of the first times this Trinitarian statement has been used in the gospels. Almost the same words have been used by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 13.13, written earlier than the gospels, Paul gives this blessing, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

That word communion is so important; the Trinity of the Godhead, the three persons, are in complete communion with one another. The Father is in the Spirit and the Son, the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit in the Father and the Son. The theological term for this is Perichoresis, the interpenetration or communion of relationship within the Godhead. I once heard it described as, 'the divine dance of love,' a community of three in one in perfect harmony, which I think is beautiful. It is of course our pattern for our own communities.

The Trinity is a mystery and one that is so profound that we cannot ever really comprehend it but it is the foundation of our belief. The Trinity, three persons in one God, is the basis of our faith; we affirm it every time we say the Creed. Think of our baptism service centred in belief in the Trinity. Godhead as Trinity is the foundation of everything. The Trinity is wonderful because it is rooted in relationship and our God; the God who at the incarnation came to be with us and sent the Spirit at Pentecost has a continuing relationship with us. There is nothing remote about the triune God; every time we turn to him he is there. The words, 'God is love,' are so very apt. His love surrounds us every step of our lives. We therefore should reflect that communion of love in our relationships.

Trinity Sunday therefore celebrates not only our God as three in one but the Christian's wonderful relationship with the God who loves us and cares for us.

We looked last week at the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to those first followers and at how they are not only emboldened and strengthened but authorised to go out in Jesus' name with the power of the Spirit.

We have now left our set of readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Those readings told of the doings of the Apostles inspired and authorised by the Holy Spirit, they were accounts of men and women transformed. Our reading for today is from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. The style and content is very different. We have looked at a good deal of Paul's writings during the last year. Once again we find ourselves in the middle of a careful, dense and very full argument which is almost impossible to understand fully when taken out of context. As so often with Paul he is explaining a case and one idea is of necessity dependent on the one before. If we look back to the beginning of chapter 8 this becomes clearer.

^{8.1} 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The law of God given at Mount Sinai was a guide to God's people. If they lived according to God's law it was a road or path to the true way of life. We know however that over the centuries people strayed from God's way; also the law had been added to and it became almost a tool of control in the hand of the powerful. It had become a yoke. The law of itself could not give true life; that came in Jesus the Messiah. Think of what Jesus says in Matthew 5. 17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.' Jesus then is the fulfilment of God's promises and the fulfilment of God's life giving law. Indeed true life is given through Christ. As Paul says just prior to the passage set for today,

⁶'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God'.

Those who set their minds on evil and sin, that is the selfish ways of the flesh, as it is meant here, will not turn to Jesus or accept his message, but those who do and live the Christian life, will share in his resurrection.

'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

We can understand now why the first words in verse twelve are, 'So then,' or it follows that. Paul makes the point that we are no longer in debt to the flesh, it doesn't control us. We are in debt to God- in other words he came and died and rose for us that is our debt of gratitude; we are or should be dependent on God and our lives and thoughts should be governed by his way. As I have said before, instead of 'flesh' we could substitute sin and for 'Spirit,' that which is of God. Indeed, after Pentecost, the Spirit of God dwells within us, a point Paul often makes. We cannot be held in bondage by sin if we have turned to Christ and, this is the most important part of Paul's argument, if we live according to Jesus' teaching, according to God's word.

'If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.'

God, by free grace, has given us salvation. Jesus won that for us at Calvary and by his resurrection but sin has not gone away. Not then and not now and is always ready to lure people back, 'in thought and deed and word.' No one is without sin, only Jesus, the incarnate God. His life is our pattern; his way is ours to follow just as best as we fallible humans can. We need to thank God for his love and trust in his saving grace.

Verse 14 is a wonderful one; those who truly turn to him are now inheritors not strangers. We are God's beloved children. We must not throw away all that Christ has won for us by slipping into sin but instead walk in God's way and be adopted by him. We are inheritors of all God's gifts; we are part of the new creation, God's plan to bring about perfected creation. This began in Christ and we his followers must continue in it and help to bring it to fruition.

If we are adopted by him we can, like Jesus, really call God Father and Paul uses the Aramaic word 'Abba'. Jesus uses it when he teaches his disciples to pray, 'Our Father.' 'Abba' is the familiar form, like 'daddy'. It resonates with closeness and love. This is the kind of relationship we can have with God our creator.

Thus we are heirs. The promise is amazing, verse 17, 'and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs of God with Christ.' The promise of God for the Messiah is rule over all creation. That is ours too with him if we are truly his followers. That promise carries huge responsibilities. We cannot call ourselves Christians and live in our own desires and selfishness. That's the whole point. If we say 'I turn to Christ,' then we have to really do that, not just by what we say but by what we do and how we act. 'I tell you whatever you do to these you do also to me.'

Interestingly Paul follows this with,^{17b} 'if in fact we suffer with him so that we might be glorified with him.' That is what so many of the early followers of Jesus could expect, persecution was very real. This leads on to Paul's next point v18 where he says what we suffer here is 'not worth comparing with the glory that is to come.' This must have inspired those who were going through difficult times due to their belief in Jesus.

It is at this point that Paul's writing becomes eschatological. He turns his attention to the end time. What he is talking about is not just personal salvation it is about the redemption and recreation of the entire creation, so that creation will be set free from corruption and decay.

¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'

It means all redeemed creation in harmony, as God intended it to be. It is his creation perfected. But that is not instantaneous, it takes time it is a process. Paul talks of both creation and the children of God waiting with eager longing. The first fruits Jesus won for humanity, it is up to us to act according to his word so his kingdom can finally come,

"Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.'

We are still waiting in hope, but must also live actively as children of hope so that God can work through us that transformation of his world. Paul shows us God's plan of salvation for the whole of creation and humanity, the glorious rule of Jesus over the whole world. God's kingdom will come and his glory will be revealed. God gave humans free will. Humanity of its own free will must live according to God's way, not the way of sin.

It isn't just that creation is waiting to share in the freedom of God's children, but when God's heirs are glorified the creation will be transformed by that to what God always intended. We hold the

responsibility of helping in the process of bringing God's kingdom in by our actions. That isn't a disembodied place; it is the bringing about of a new perfected created order on earth. An earth and people in harmony and ruled over by Jesus, brought about through the good actions of humanity and God's final judgement when sin will be vanquished. Part of a Christian's job is to help in this process but we are called to share in the world's pain and to try to do something about it.

We know that the present reality is very different from Paul's overview of God's final promise but the Spirit of God is within us. It's up to us to do our own small part to facilitate the bringing in of God's kingdom.

If we look at our passage it is rooted in Trinitarian theology,

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'

The Spirit is within us, we are God's children and his heirs with Jesus the second person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God.

At first sight the gospel reading which concerns the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus seems to have little to link it with the passage from Paul actually there are strong links as we will see. Nicodemus is not mentioned in the synoptic gospels only in John and he is mentioned by John on three occasions. Firstly this visit to Jesus 'by night', secondly in chapter 7 Jesus is preaching in the Temple during the festival of booths. The Jewish leaders want him arrested but Nicodemus says ⁵¹'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' he is obviously a just man and as we will see in the gospel passage very interested in Jesus teachings. Finally he appears in chapter 19 after the crucifixion.

³⁸ 'After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.'

We remember Joseph but not usually Nicodemus, he then performs the last act of service to Jesus with Joseph.

The passage states that Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews; he is respected and is a Pharisee and a rabbi. This learned and influential man seems fascinated by Jesus' teaching. The fact that he comes 'by night' though suggests that this meeting is secret and he doesn't want it known. He acknowledges that Jesus must be from God, who could perform the signs he does unless that were true? That is far more than most of the Pharisees were prepared to go.

Jesus' answer is abrupt, 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' This is the link to our earlier passage. Jesus is referring to being born in the Spirit. Nicodemus, who is a learned Jew, is probably only getting Jesus to expand and explain his teaching when he chooses to focus on literal birth. Jesus does expand his meaning,

'I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'

The word 'born' would have immediately resonated with any Jew. Lineage was important. They were descendants, children of Abraham and fond of quoting that. To be descendants of Abraham they thought made them right with God. But that is not all there is to it. Jesus says to them at Matthew 3.9

'Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'

And again in John 8. 33

³³They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'³⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

This links to the passage from Paul. Jesus has come to fulfil the promises of God made to the Jews. He is the life giver; the Messiah. Being an heir of Abraham is not the point now. If they reject him they reject the one who sent him, they reject God. Also you cannot commit sin and be free; you are in bondage to sin. Only belief in Jesus and living in his way will bring freedom and eternal life through him. God is bringing in a new way now through Jesus. Think back to our reading.

¹⁴'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'

This makes clear what Jesus is saying. The way to new life is through belief in him, the one sent by God to rescue believers from sin and death. Baptism by water and the Spirit is the new birth that they will receive from God. Then they will be truly sons of God through him. Think of the baptism of Cornelius. The Spirit descends upon these Gentiles and as Paul says who can refuse baptism to them. Think of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, as he comes up from the water the Spirit descended on him. Think of our own baptism by water and the Spirit. We are children of God through Jesus and the Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God should be present in us and obvious in what we do. We are or should be Spirit filled people.

^{3.7}'Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The 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.'

This takes us right back to Genesis,

^{1.1} 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

² And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'

The Spirit, like the wind, cannot be seen; we can only see what it does, its works. So with someone who is baptised of the Spirit they will become Spirit filled people. The key is trust. We cannot see the Spirit we trust and have faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nicodemus still questions, Jesus answers him,

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?'

Jesus speaks the word of God because he is of God but as he says, if you do not understand and believe when I tell you of earthly things you certainly won't if I speak of heavenly things. What Jesus says next is not equivocal at all it is one of his clearest statements

¹³'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.' Jesus is from God and will return to God. He not only brings the word of God but he who is one with him is fulfilling the prophecies. He is the one who will redeem not just Israel but the whole world. All who turn to him will receive the promises of God and salvation. They will receive new life as children of God; they will be healed of their sin.

To illustrate this Jesus refers back to Numbers 21. 8. God punished the people in the wilderness for disobedience and discontent and sent serpents into the camp. The people begged Moses to help them. He prayed to God and God told him to make a bronze serpent on a pole and hold it up. All who looked on it would be healed of the bites of the serpents. (Incidentally this badge is still used in some medical organisations as a symbol of healing.)

The metaphor Jesus uses is obvious.

^{3.14}'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

Jesus when lifted up on the cross he will draw all to him and all who believe in him will be healed of their sins and receive eternal life. Jesus, part of the Godhead, takes all evil on himself on the cross, conquers it once and for all and sets us free. 'By his wounds we are healed.'

Our passage ends with this wonderful promise, notice the emphasis is on love once more. It says God loves the world,

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.' The world is God's creation. It will be perfected in the new creation; Jesus is the one through whom this perfection will come. Remember that the promise given to Abraham was that he would become the 'father of many nations' not just the Jews. The good news of Jesus Christ is for all humanity and all who turn to him receive God's grace.

From the first followers who turned to Jesus, who heard him and believed, from the first Jewish Christians (maybe Nicodemus too who ministered to him in death,) who were the yeast, the mustard seed, the word of God and the Christian faith has spread throughout the world. We are the heirs of God and his children; his promise is for us and all humanity. May we live out the Christian faith we profess for Jesus asks no less.

'All over the world the Spirit is moving.' Roy Turner.

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