

# Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2024, Trinity Sunday

Readings: **Isaiah 6:1-8**

Romans 8:12-17

**Psalm 29**

**John 3:1-17**

This Sunday is known as Trinity Sunday, so we'll focus on this important understanding of God being both three persons and one! It is an interesting thing to consider how humanity has variously expressed understandings of God with the very finite words of language... and to consider what words and images make sense to us.

If you and I had to draw a picture of the Triune God... how would we do it? As a starting point we could start with today's Old Testament reading in which Isaiah had a vision that God was, '*sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the Temple.*' In that vision the temple was filled with smoke, and six-winged creatures were calling out to one another, and Isaiah was afraid! Then, we are told, while Isaiah was still trembling one of the six-winged creatures came and touched Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, assuring him that his guilt and sin would from that moment on be blotted out.

As we try to imagine this do we imagine God being young or old? Is God heavily built, or slender? What does the throne look like, and what about those six-winged creatures called seraphs?

I am not good at drawing and so think of a painting that has helped many visualise a Western understanding of a Triune God. Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement' is a huge painting on the wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In this a male pair of legs sit on a throne, in the clouds, at the top of the painting. In the middle a muscular, and beardless, Jesus is judging who is acceptable and who is not, while angels take some people up, and demons take others down... and there is a dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, mid-way between the feet of God and Jesus.

This hierarchical image is a Western way of understanding the Trinity – with God portrayed as a mighty king, giving Jesus authority to judge, while the Holy Spirit is present and active between heaven and earth. I don't want to over think it, but the Western Church seems to have adopted some of this understanding in its three Orders of Ordained ministry! A Diocesan bishop has a throne in a Cathedral called a Cathedra, and through a licence they give authority to priests who judge and care, while deacons and lay ministers are active in the wider world!

In the Eastern Orthodox Christian understanding of Trinity the key word used to explain the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit is *perichoresis*. A Greek word which means

mutual indwelling. This does not infer a hierarchy of power, but rather a loving community of three persons in which each are equal.

A famous image from this Orthodox tradition is a Fifteenth Century Russian icon by the artist Andrei Rublev, which depicts three figures sitting around a table sharing a meal.

How might you and I imagine the Trinity, and how would we express that understanding in our own words?

Bishop Michael Curry has been the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States for the last nine years. In our Australian Anglican context, he would be known as the Primate and Bishop Curry will soon retire from this role.

I think Bishop Michael is a great preacher and perhaps his most memorable sermon was given when he preached at the Royal wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle six years ago. In this he began with two threefold invocations. The first indicated the nature of God: loving, liberating, and life-giving God; while the second offered the more traditional: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'In the name of our **loving, liberating, and life-giving** God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit...' he began, before going on to speak about the power of love.

I re-read that sermon sometimes because he spoke about the potential power of God's love, not only for the couple getting married, but for all of humanity. Led by the Spirit – I understand that he well and truly went off the pre-approved script - Bishop Michael spoke about the power of God's love to bring about transformation and justice in the lives of individuals and in the life of the world.

I think the wisdom he offered then continues to challenge the reality of conflict, injustice, and abuse that exists in our time and as I say this I am thinking particularly of the war between Russia and Ukraine which has claimed an estimated ten and a half thousand people in the last two and a quarter years; the war between Israel and Hamas in which an estimated thirty six thousand people have died over the last seven months; the reality of gun violence in the US, in which more than forty thousand people were killed last year; and for us in Australian society the ongoing reality of violence perpetrated against women with 33 women in Australia murdered in the first four months this year largely by a man that they knew. Bishop Michael said,

*"If you don't believe me, just stop and imagine. Think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families where love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and*

*nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where this love is the way. Imagine this tired old world where love is the way.*

*When love is the way – it is unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.*

*When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again.*

*When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.*

*When love is the way, poverty will become history.*

*When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.*

*When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, and study war no more.*

*When love is the way, there's plenty of good room - for all of God's children.*

*Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well... like we are actually family.*

*When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters... children of God."*

I think Bishop Michael suggested that our understanding of God being a community of three persons is not an algebra problem, but rather a relational mystery to be inspired by. For, if we accept that the core nature of the relationship between the three persons of God is love, and we understand ourselves to be made in God's image, then surely, we can work to bring love into our relationships with others?

In some ways this is easier to achieve in small groups, and small congregations... but, surely there is a vision and hope in this for all communities, denominations, and societies?

In church and society how do we move from various forms of competition in which there are winners and losers to more loving ways of living collaboratively? How do we change our way of speaking and thinking about 'them' and 'us' to... to a more loving... 'we'?

This week in Australia there is a national focus on reconciliation that seeks more respectful relationship and understanding between the wider community, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Each year it begins on the 27<sup>th</sup> May because that is the anniversary of the 1967 referendum that first allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to vote; and it ends on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June which is the anniversary of the High Court Mabo decision which legally recognised, for the first time, the traditional ownership of land.

As we think about the need for reconciliation, for more respectful relationship, and for greater understanding, I think some of the questions I asked earlier are relevant. In Australia how do we move from various forms of competition in which there are winners and losers, to more loving ways of living collaboratively? And, how do we change our way of speaking and thinking from 'them' and 'us', to a more loving and generous... 'we'?

Michael Curry's words, inspired by his understanding of Trinity, are helpful for he said,

*'When love is the way, there's plenty of good room - for all of God's children...*

*'... Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well... like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters... children of God.'*

We believe that God has not abandoned us in this ongoing work but sends the Holy Spirit to inspire and empower, transform and make whole, wherever we are...

And, we meet with that same Spirit each time we pray. So, would you please join me as I close in prayer now:

Loving, liberating, and life-giving God, we give thanks for the gift of your Spirit in our lives; the renewal of your Spirit in the Church; and the ongoing work of your Spirit in the world. We pray for your blessing on the ongoing work of reconciliation and justice in Australia and ask that you renew within us a way of being in the world that makes your love known. We pray, in the name of the one who said, 'I will send you a helper', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.