

*Trinity Sunday 2018
Jesus College Oxford*

In nomine . . .

Did you see the wedding? I didn't, because I was in Sweden, but apparently 2 billion other people around the world did. I wonder what they remember? When I watched the highlights afterwards, one thing struck me above all. Not the music, not the sermon, but the TRAIN. Did you see that train? 15 feet long. It took 500 hours to make. What a sight.

But it was nothing compared to what Isaiah saw in the Temple. Were you listening?

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

A young, wealthy man at court, Isaiah, is in the Temple in Jerusalem. He has a stunning vision, a vision of God himself, in the year 742BC, the year that King Uzziah died. God himself, on his throne, wearing a robe so astonishingly grand that the whole Temple is filled by it. If the train filled the temple that existed in 742 BC it would have been a bit longer than 15 feet. Hold on to that image. For the Lord is not alone.

Above him were seraphs, each with six wings; with two wings they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

These are the seraphim, in attendance on God in his glory. They are covering their faces because the glory of God is too much for them to bear. Two wings cover their bodies, in the Hebrew that is a reference to their private parts.

These mysterious creatures sing a song in worship of the Lord which is such an appropriate response to God's glory that we still use it today

Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty: the whole earth is full of his glory.

When Isaiah sees the vision of the Lord, with his robe filling the Temple, and the smoke filling the Temple, he sees himself as he really is, with his own heart filled, not by the incense smoke of worship, but by the acrid smelling smoke of human sinfulness.

Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips: and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!

To see God is to die, as Exodus chapter 33 will tell you. Even the seraphim have to hide their faces from the vision of the Lord. But for Isaiah this vision does not mean death, but life; the end of an old way and the beginning of a new calling. For a seraph flies to him with a burning coal from the altar which cleanses his lips and forgives his sins. And then Isaiah is able to respond to God's call of "whom shall I send?" Here am I! says Isaiah "Send me!"

And this is the point of this story, the point of all worship, the very heart of worship – to encounter God. To encounter the reality of God. And the reason that this reading features on Trinity Sunday is all about that – the reality of God, who is worshipped with that triple acclamation of praise: Holy, Holy, Holy.

To be honest, getting the Trinity Sunday gig is not going to put a smile on most preachers' faces. I often get it, because I, not very good at saying no, especially to my wife, some of whom you know. I once got the Trinity Sunday gig in Durham Cathedral, which flattered me, and massaged my not inconsiderable ego. As we processed into the quire in all our kit, I noticed a number of my former lecturers sitting in the choir stalls. This was unnerving. But it was too late to manufacture a non-threatening ecclesiastical injury, so I went for it. I waxed lyrical about Gregory of Nyssa's defence of the concept of the Trinity against those who thought that Christians worship three separate gods. I perorated (not easy in a cassock) about Augustine of Hippo and his understanding of the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. I wowed them with Marius Victorinus' explanation of how he agreed with the early Syriac theologians that the Spirit is the mother of the Saviour, and at the same time, the Son is the source of the Spirit. You can't imagine the fun we had.

After the service I tried not to catch my former teacher's eyes, but one of them was hiding behind a pillar in the south transept, ready to pounce.

"Heresy", he said, adding for good measure, "heresy, heresy". (It was, after all, Trinity Sunday, which is no doubt why he felt the need to accuse me of heresy three times). Before I could protest he continued: "You seem to have achieved a remarkable fusion of both tritheism and Sabellian modalism".

Now I don't know about you, but tritheism and Sabellian modalism aren't terms we go in for much round our neck of the woods, so I could only agree with enthusiasm.

It turned out that what had set off my erstwhile professor's heresy-ometer was not words of mine, but words of someone I quoted, someone I quoted at length actually. And hearing that last week's Evensong got you in the mood for long sermons, I hope you're sitting comfortably. Here is a short story by Leo Tolstoy.

A bishop heard from the sailors on his ship that a group of three hermits had lived on a tiny island for many years, for the salvation of their souls. As their ship passed the island, the bishop asked to stop off there to visit the holy hermits. Arriving on the island, the bishop went to the hut where the three hermits lived. They bowed low to the bishop as he approached. The bishop said: "I have heard that you godly men live here saving your own souls, and praying for others. I am an unworthy servant of Christ called to keep and teach God's flock. I wished to see you, servants of God, and to do what I can to teach you also."

Then the bishop asked how the hermits were serving God. One hermit answered: "We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves." Then the bishop asked how the hermits prayed to God. Another hermit answered: "We pray in this way: Three are Ye, Three are We, have mercy upon us." The bishop was not pleased with this reply! He said, "You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity, but you do not know the right way to pray! I will teach you." The bishop gave the hermits a theology lesson, explaining all about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then he tried to teach them the Lord's Prayer as the model prayer for all Christians. The Lord's Prayer proved difficult for the three old men, for they kept forgetting their lines. The bishop persisted in training them until sundown, when he left them and returned to his ship. The ship sailed away from the island.

Sailing through the night, the bishop was on deck unable to sleep. To his astonishment, he saw a bright light on the sea which was pursuing the ship. As the light grew near to the ship, the bishop and the helmsman could see what it was! Maybe you've guessed? It was the three hermits running together on the surface of the water across the sea.

The hermits stopped at the ship and spoke to the astonished bishop. "We have forgotten the prayer you taught us, servant of God," they said, "Teach us again!" The bishop bowed low before the hermits and said humbly, "Your own prayer will be enough. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for me, a sinner." The hermits turned, and went back across the sea towards their island, and a bright light showed their path until daybreak.

The real God, the true God, the one whom Christians recognize and worship as Father, Son, and Spirit, is a God of love. He is a God who, in the language of American TV dramas, 'reaches out'. He does it all the time. He is doing it now. And like Isaiah and his vision, like Tolstoy and his monks, he invites us to respond.

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