

Leavers' Evensong Sermon 2014 (Trinity Sunday, 15 June)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Matthew 28:16-20

In nomine...

As the Irish squirrel once said, "All good things come in threes".

OK, so I have spent a lot of time researching and practising that joke.

Researching, because I think I should probably say I didn't write it myself, it was the product of lunch with one of the many up and coming Stand-up Comedians in our college. And practising, since, as you know, many people in Oxford are closet perfectionists. But as I may just have demonstrated, however much we try to perfect something, we often don't quite manage it.

But the good news is that even if we aren't perfect, God is.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's not only the final Sunday of term this academic year, it is also the Sunday that gives this term its name. It may have taken all term to reach this point where at last the name of the term is justified, but we have made it in the end.

So - All good things come in threes. Rooms in flats in Stephens, terms in a year, Ben's triple-chocolate-chip cookies. Trinity – or the Trinity – is about completeness. Trinity term completes the year. Many of you have now completed your degrees. You may not all have scored 100% in all your papers – indeed (no offence) I think I would wonder what had gone wrong if you had – but it is finished (or it will be soon – maths, physics, engineering). Your time at Jesus College is just coming to an end. Sad face.

But God doesn't come to an end. God is perfect, and yet he doesn't begin or end. In the beginning, God. And in the middle, God. And at the end, God. In short, God is more than everlasting. He is eternal. And that is a perfection that knows no limits.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is about Threeness. Not just beginning, middle, and end; not just past, present, and future. God is not a concept. God is a person. Or rather, three persons (just to be confusing). One God, Three Persons. So on Trinity Sunday, or in Trinity Term, we celebrate the personhood of God. And how those three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – co-exist, one but three, three but one.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is about relationship, community. And what better way to bring this term to a close than to think about the community that you are a part of here? Some of you will return next term, some of you will return next year after a year abroad, but quite a lot of you here tonight are about to change your relationship with our community.

Once a member, always a member: you continue to be members of Jesus College, even if you're no longer a student here. You're part of the family, even when you've flown the nest. But your relationship with the community will change.

You might think that some things never change. I know, for instance, that even after you lot have left, there will be students here – perhaps even Fellows – who will banter and joke long after their bedtime. There will be students here who think they didn't deserve their places – and still get First class degrees. There will be people popping corks at the clock in second quad, there will be people fighting for desks in the library, there will be Pimms at the boathouse, there will be war with Exeter. There will be bells chiming throughout Oxford, there will be bicycles, there will be subfusc, there will be punting.

Some things don't change. But one thing that won't change, is that there will always be change.

I hope you've changed while you've been here. Not that I didn't like you in Freshers' Week... But as Winston Churchill said, in June 1925, in the House of Commons, "To improve is to change, so to be perfect is to change often." Like my poor joke-telling ability, however hard we try, we may not reach perfection. But we do change. And where there is time, there is change.

Our first reading, one of the ancient Wisdom writings of the Bible, was about time. Different times for different things. Times for opposites, times set aside for the entire range of things we might face in our lives. If we were to rewrite Ecclesiastes today for right here and right now, we might have lines like “there is a time for everything, a time to work and a time to rest, a time to be stressed and a time to be relaxed, a time to be lonely and a time to party, a time to come to Jesus College and a time to leave it.”

For some of you, your time here is coming to a close: but the end of one thing means the beginning of another, and every closure is an opening. Your life lies open ahead of you. Your present life at Jesus will soon become the past, and your future, your life beyond Jesus College, will soon be your present. All change.

The Wisdom teacher said “God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.”

What does this mean – “eternity in the human heart”? Look at the picture you are holding. Three figures – a traditional image of the three persons of God adapted from an Old Testament story in the Bible where the patriarch Abraham welcomes three mysterious visitors and gives them hospitality. Around the common table sit Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Father on the left, in a shimmering indescribable robe; Father points to the Son, in the middle, clothed in blue symbolising divinity and brown for humanity; Son points to the Spirit on the right, with fresh blues and greens of air and water. The Spirit figure points towards the gap, the open edge of the table, which is where we onlookers stand. The Trinity relates one to each other, and invites us to participate, draws us into the picture. We are invited to join in their perfect relationship.

So it all comes back to community. God is eternal relationship and we have a part in this divine love. Love that has no beginning or end, love that is eternal and indescribable. Love that acts in time – in Jesus, in each of our lives – and love that exists beyond time. Love that marks the lives of Christians and offers a greater perspective to every moment of time.

Where does this get us today? The fact that today we remember not only Leavers, but also the Trinity, points us to a bigger picture. Each of our “whens” and “thens” and “nows” is part of God’s “always” and “everywhere”. No matter how big the life-changes are that face us – leaving Oxford, getting married, getting a job, having children – God is always there, and God is always bigger. We are finite; God is infinite. And that’s why the risen Jesus says, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus, the Son of God, who’s gone through not only struggles, but even death – he is with us, everywhere, always, in all things. Jesus, the living, breathing, Son of God. Perfect love, walking around. Hand in hand, God and man. Love come to life.¹

Let Love stabilise you in times of change. You have I hope made many good relationships while you’ve been here, and you will continue to build these up and to begin new relationships in the future. And while there is change everywhere we look, there is only one thing that doesn’t change: the love that is at the heart of God.

The Trinity is a firm foundation of how Christians express their faith, in word, in image, in music. As you go from here, take those postcards, let relationship be central to your lives. Think about what foundations you are building your lives on. As you have been shaped by the foundation of Jesus College, now it’s time for you to think about how your foundations here might help you to shape the lives of others.

All good things come in threes. That’s why Jesus has three quads. Each different characters, each different spaces, yet one and the same space. Our space. Blades are celebrated by doorways, wisteria blossoms, grass is variously here and there, for keeping off or for lounging on. Three quads, one college. Relationship in our very foundations. May Jesus be a solid foundation for the rest of your lives.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnTrzlic7H4>