

The church compresses into 6 months, from December through to May or June, all the great church festivals and Trinity Sunday, today, is the last of these milestones. Now lies ahead a long stretch of weeks without any major festivals before we reach another Advent.

A number of comments made by clergy and ourselves as Readers about preaching on Trinity Sunday come to mind. Raymond once said something like ‘it seems often to fall to me to try and unravel the complex doctrine of the Trinity.’ Geoffrey, in turn, found himself preaching on Trinity Sunday two if not three times in a row and made like comment. This is certainly not *my* first time. Paul Holland takes a rather more relaxed line: *it’s really not that complicated*, he says, *just try and enjoy basking in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Well, let’s just enjoy basking then! I’m not going to grapple with the complexities of the doctrine but instead say a little about study groups in our church, because in one of these, which Lucy Hine and myself started up 18 months ago, we’ve been focusing recently on St Paul. And Paul it was who gives us at the close of 2 Corinthians, an alternative reading for today, the familiar Trinitarian words: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.* I’ll be bold and say I think our group has been witnessing this trinity of riches through our months together; and I hope that same *grace, love and fellowship* will be bestowed in full upon you, our baptism candidates today, Rory, Collette and Georgia and your families.

Over time in this church questionnaires have gone out asking members of the congregation what especially they like, or recommend be improved. What often has come up has been a request for more learning opportunities and to my mind one of the best learning opportunities, clergy tuition aside, can be home and/or Bible study groups. Not because those leading them – and we’ve shared leadership in ours – provide answers to the many questions faith brings up, but because sharing and being honest with one another about matters of faith, you’re reminded that you’re not alone with some of the big questions, and are there times when we all feel we are?

It's good that often you have to thrash things out and agree to differ. Certainly we've had a few differences of opinion studying Paul, finding him an extraordinary mix of qualities which at best have delighted and at worst confused us. Paul appears to provoke people as much in recent times as he did in the early church. Then they'd throw stones at him, now they tend to throw words. And we've thrown a few!

But having just reached the end of his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians, we've had to agree that complex and contradictory though he was, in *this* he never wavers: the source of his spiritual strength was Christ himself. *I've no lofty words*, he boasts (one of his favourite words): *I know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

We've grappled with much during our evenings: what do all those familiar words and themes that pepper Paul's text *really* mean: alienation from God through sin, judgement, life beyond the grave, justification by faith. And hard though we found much of it, maybe what sustained us was the knowledge that we were reading about someone who himself grappled with so much.

Crossing over from Asia Minor to Greece in response to a vision, almost at once Paul's troubles begin. He's beaten up and imprisoned in Philippi, ridiculed by the intelligentsia of Athens; setbacks in missionary work, character belittled. He's accused of arrogance, of being self-seeking, of boasting without anything to boast about, other apostles are suspicious of him. Some believe he had a nervous breakdown. And when at last things seem to be looking up he declares a messenger of Satan torments him to keep him from being too elated. *A thorn in the flesh*, he says. How much more can the man take?

Ah, but *grace*, another of Paul's favourite words. *Three times*, he writes, *I appealed to the Lord and he said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness.'* For Paul it seems the struggle and suffering was ongoing but the grace of his Lord Jesus Christ came in an inexhaustible supply.

What have we in our study group taken away from this man of such passion and conviction, one literally – in modern speak - *turned on* by Christ? Speaking for myself, above all this: most of us through life have to put up with some sort of thorn in the flesh, something physical, emotional, or spiritual that makes life very hard. But if like Paul we can lay ourselves and our concerns at the foot of the Cross in prayer then maybe for us too, *the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God will see us through for His strength is indeed greatest when we are most vulnerable.*

And this too: we've felt enriched in *fellowship*. But it cannot or shouldn't stop there. *What shall we do?* some early disciples ask Peter in Acts of the Apostles. We've asked ourselves the same question. Christ reminds us at the end of Matthew's Gospel today that we should go out and make disciples of all nations. Mission is an integral part of the Gospel. Christians are members of the Church sent into the world to do God's will, and mission includes all forms of Christian service. One vital aspect of it is evangelism, the sharing of the Good News of Christ with others. Evangelism may sometimes attract a bad press but in essence it's about the love of God in our world. Those who believe they've received this love naturally want to share it with others.

Who better demonstrated this than Paul, at pains to share with others, and in his own words: *The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.* Indeed a trinity of riches. Our home group has spent many weeks in Paul's company and are grateful for them.

Amen