

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries for Trinity Sunday

16th June 2019, St Mary's, Barnes

I suspect we have all had the experience of standing outside and looking at the night sky, the stars so far away, the whole so mysterious. And we may have thought to ourselves. “How can we possibly imagine the power or mind behind this.? Its way beyond anything we can conceive or picture.” That’s a good thought to have. As the great bastion of Christian orthodoxy, John of Damascus put it in the 8th century. “What God is in himself is totally inconceivable and unknowable.”

We don’t know God in himself, but what God has done is disclose to us in human terms, enough of himself not just to know, but to live by.

Many will be familiar with the lovely painting of the Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca in the National Gallery. It shows Christ by the river Jordan, with the words coming from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”, and the Holy Spirit, symbolised by a dove, hovering above his head. This was the reality in which Jesus was rooted. This was the reality that he lived out in his ministry. His being was directed to the one he addressed as “Abba, Father”. It was lived out as a beloved Son, and he was enabled to do this because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what God has revealed to us. This is God as Holy Trinity, which we think about and celebrate on this Sunday. God as three persons, or to use a term which some prefer, three modes of being.

Another painting you might have seen, perhaps by Giotto or Titian, is of the Risen Christ encountering Mary Magdalene in the Garden outside the tomb. It shows Mary kneeling at Christ’s feet trying to hold on to him, as he turns away from her. It is usually known as “Noli Tangere”. Do not touch me, or better, do not cling or hold on to me. But it is the following words which Jesus spoke to her which are of

crucial importance. “Do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Earlier in his ministry Jesus had told his friends that a time would come when his presence would be with them in a way that would never be taken from them. They would have a joy that could not be destroyed, a peace that the world could not give. Jesus tells Mary, that time is not yet, for he has not ascended to the Father-but it is coming.

He calls his followers “brothers”, or as we would say “brothers and sisters”, and the God to whom he is going is “My Father and your Father, My God and your God.” He is taking them into the same relationship to God that he himself eternally enjoys. Through him, our human brother, we are to call God Father, and we are enabled to do that through the power of the Holy Spirit within us.

So, what is revealed is not just the knowledge of God in human terms, but how we are to live in divine terms. Indeed, the two are intimately linked. We know God in human terms only in so far as we are able to live our human lives in divine terms, that is, in Christ, as beloved children in relation to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is how we are to live, and living that way, that is how we know God. We cannot know God as an item of speculative knowledge, for God is, by definition one who makes a total difference to our life. And he is known only as he makes himself known, and as we allow ourselves to be caught up in that knowledge in such a way as to live by it. And in living by it we find that presence of Christ with us, the joy that nothing can destroy, the peace he came to give, that union of our lives with his.

Many years ago, when I was listening to the radio, I heard an American preacher say “Why did God create the world? God created the world because God was lonely.” How wrong can you get? God did not create the world because he was lonely but out of the overflowing fullness of his love. That’s why when Christians do try to think of God in himself, they think of a fathomless self-giving

reciprocated a flawless filial response, with a circle of love flowing between them. This God of love, which with our human words we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three modes of being, is fully and perfectly complete in himself. We come out of that fullness.

There is an old Jewish myth about God creating the world and being worried that he would so fill it with his presence that it would leave no space for his creatures. So, he withdraws himself, he leaves a space where he is not, so that his creatures can have a life of their own, not totally overwhelmed and absorbed by him.

Of course, there is no space where God is not. Moment by moment he holds us in being. But the truth that the story brings out is that we have really been given a life of our own. We have, as it were, been put outside God's life with a life for which we are responsible.

This belief is shared by both Jews and Muslims. There is One God, the creator of all that is, and we have been given a life to lead for which we are ultimately accountable. But Christians go beyond this and say, it is not the will of God to leave us outside his life for ever. In the person of his Son he comes among us to take us into his life. Through union with his life, in the power of the spirit, we are taken into the life of God himself.

The bridge thrown across the abyss between the unimaginable uncreated source of all things and creation is the person of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God works first to fill the Church, and then all things, with his presence. It is this theme which is spelt out so profoundly in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians.

First, "For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied" (Colossians 2, 9).

Secondly, the God who fills Christ Jesus wills to fill those who are his. The great prayer in Ephesians ends up “That you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3, 19).

Thirdly, the purpose of God does not end there. It is to fill all things with his presence. For the Church is “His body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1, 23).

This is heady stuff, way beyond anything we can conceive or imagine.

The simple truth, though, is that when we say the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this is not just a formula which we recite. It is the very life blood of Christians. When someone is baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, they are incorporated into the very life of God. When a priest gives a blessing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, it is not just a pious form of words, it is that which sustains and enables our life. So, to that God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all glory now and evermore.