

LEP SERVICE WITH ST MARY'S, URC, AND ST BARTHOLOMEW'S  
TRINITY SUNDAY (ANGLICAN) – 30<sup>TH</sup> MAY, 2010

READING: JOHN 17: 20 - 26

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May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit

What is your image of God?

The world at large seems to have gained a poor Sunday school image of a wrathful God.

I believe that if the church took a look again at its image of God, the church's mission will have more power in the world.

I have a theory that churches look like the God they believe in.

For example, a church that believes in a hierarchical God, Father then Son then Holy Spirit, may well itself be hierarchical: If you're Anglican like me, the hierarchy normally has the choir at the top, then the church wardens, and then the vicar at the bottom!

More seriously, a church that believes in an authoritarian Father figure God, may well itself be authoritarian...

A church that believes in a purely personal saviour God, might believe that religion is private thing, they may talk about 'my' church, and what 'I' like and want in a service...

I'll leave it to you to think about how the life of your own church reflects the God that it believes in!

I'm currently trying to explain God to my children Jude & Hannah - it's very hard to explain the Trinity to a two and half year old!

They were watching an episode of The Simpsons the other day, and God was shown as a huge pointy hand from the clouds telling everyone off and smiting them on a whim.

That's not the understanding of God I want give to my children!

And yet, this is probably how most people in the West would describe God - where did they get this image from? The Church?

Perhaps it's no wonder that people reject that picture of God and the church with it, rather than the true God himself.

And many of us may want to reject that very same image of God that the atheists do.

Like Meister Eckhart who prayed- "God rid me of god". We know that any human description of God can only ever be wrong or incomplete in the face of the infinite and transcendent.

But our faith compels us to try the impossible - to try to understand the mysterious God we follow. And then to find ways to describe our experience to the world - in words and actions.

I'd like to give my kids, and my friends, another image of God - one that has inspired me in recent years.

As you'd expect on Trinity Sunday, it's that particular doctrine I'd like to share with you today. I love the Trinity - the belief that God is 1, and yet 3, implies within itself movement, and a community within the heart of God, that simply could not exist in a simple Unitarian description.

The early Church Fathers' taught this, using the Greek term "Perichoresis" - they were describing a mutual and intimate indwelling of the 3 Persons of the Trinity, existing in one another and for one another in interdependent giving and receiving.

It comes from verses such as in our reading - listen again to Jesus:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."

Perichoresis is often pictured as a dance - close your eyes and imagine the three Persons of the Trinity holding hands in a circle, and you'll get the picture.

A dance such as the Tango can't be done alone - it becomes more than the sum of its parts when two or more come together in common purpose, giving, rather than taking.

And the giving in this case couldn't be bigger - creation and redemption, the whole big story of the universe, are understood to be the loving overflow of God's open, outgoing dance of generosity.

And we too are invited to join the Trinity's dance.

Jesus goes on to pray:

“May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me”

Bishop Desmond Tutu has described lives imitating the Trinity using an African term: Ubuntu. Ubuntu says “I am a person because you are a person” – No man is an island, and we are only fully human through others and the 3 in 1 God. A person with Ubuntu, just like the Trinity, is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole.

Time for a visual example! Can I invite everyone to stand up? We’re going to do a sticky version of The Peace. I’ll ask you to say slightly different words, and it’s sticky because I’d like you not to let go when you shake hands! Find someone near to you – perhaps in the row in front or behind you, maybe someone from a different church – shake their hands and tell them “I’m a person because you are a person”. Keep holding hands afterwards – and when you’re done I’ll give you step two!

Now, if you have any remaining hands left, find another person and do the same – keep holding hands! Try to ensure that no-one has a hand free...

OK! Thank you! – Take a look around, and note how you feel. Please sit down.

How did it feel to be part an unbroken chain, facing each other? Connected? Vulnerable? But hopefully supported, as we were all in it together.

This is what the Trinity begins to teach us.

OK – I won’t ask you to untangle yourselves this time – please sit down!

The LEP between St Mary’s, the URC and St Bartholomew’s is a great example of Ubuntu within our different church congregations. I pray that the LEP continues to be a place of giving, in surrender to a common purpose – 3 churches, yet one.

I believe a church that has a deep commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity will be a place where:

- There is unity, even with a diverse group of people
- A place where everyone is valued
- Where there is no them & us, church or unchurched
- Where hospitality is practiced in our church buildings and in our homes – to those who are different from us, and even to those we may not like!
- A place where we don’t say “Oh, I’m not a preacher” or “I can’t run youth group” – but where we all have something to give. And we where can all support each other
- Where we all grow in our gifts together

- A place where the community comes together to create worship, rather than consuming a service provided by 'professionals'

Our community is watching the actions of the church – what would it learn from a church that took seriously the image of the Trinity?

Firstly the church would be engaging with the community around it.

Just as the Father sent the Son, so we are sent out, taking the initiative rather than waiting for others to come to us.

The Son could not embrace us from afar, but drew near to us through the Incarnation – in the same way we must draw near to others, on their terms, to embrace and love our neighbours.

It sounds hard, but the Holy Spirit will give us power to participate in God's mission to the world.

Finally, a church like this - open and available to others, affirming of others, not threatened that others are able and good – confident in its own purpose, distinctly Christian – may not give a picture of God as a remote institution with a rule book, but as a loving community inviting the world in....

Just as God really is.

Amen

[Speaker: Kevin Betts]