

Sermon for Trinity Sunday – 30 May 2021 – Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; John 3: 1 – 17

God so loved

You may well know this, especially if you spend time out walking in remote places. There's now a phone app called what3words. Every three metre by three metre square on the planet has been linked to three words. And by finding out your three words you can find out where you are if you are lost and direct the emergency services to find you. That's a powerful use of three words – and of the internet!

Today I'm thinking about just three words too. 'God so loved'. Three words from the beginning of one of the most famous verses in the Bible – John 3: 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We just heard the verse in our Gospel reading. But I'm concentrating on just those three words – God so loved.

First of all God so loved, because God is love. Having celebrated Pentecost last Sunday and the gift of the Holy Spirit, this Sunday we celebrate God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The idea of the Trinity came out of the experience of the earliest Christians. They had always prayed to God the Father, to whom Jesus Himself prayed; then they recognised Jesus as also God and finally they experienced the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. From this they deduced that God must be three, but also one, in some way that is beyond our human understanding. For us one being is one person. But for God three beings are one Godhead. They are united as one in an intimate and endless circle of the giving and receiving of love which passes between them. So when we say God is love – God is love in Himself. We have relationships with people who are outside of us, but God has relationships of love within himself. God so loved because God is love. And this love within the Godhead is perfect.

Someone has described the Trinity as "an infinite interplay of relational life into which a whole universe is created and called to share"¹. That might need a bit of unpacking!

So – in other words - God so loved, and out of the overflow of His love came the whole universe. If we go back to the book of Genesis, as our Wednesday study group was doing this week, we find that God created everything, and it was good. Human beings were made as the pinnacle of God's good creation, and made to be in relationship with one another and with God. As we know, from the story of Adam and Eve and that apple, and from our own experience of the world, human beings have messed up, but God has never given up on us. God is all the time trying to teach the universe how to know and love God. Despite appearances, the whole universe is on a homeward journey towards the infinitely knowing and loving existence that is the Trinity. God is drawing us back to Himself.

¹ Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, p113

God so loved. So loved that he has sent Jesus to us, as His last word, to demonstrate to us the lengths that He will go to for us. Even the cross. And to give us a way back so that we can join in the circle of love that passes between the members of the Trinity. When we believe in Jesus we're invited in. Jesus tells us we can now call God our Father too, and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to be at work in us and through us.

In our Gospel reading today we meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a very learned and respectable member of the Jewish establishment. Someone who knew all of the rules about how to be holy, how to keep in with God. He dimly grasps that in Jesus God is doing something new. He senses the presence of God in Jesus because of the miracles Jesus is able to do. They are signs of God. He wants to check Jesus out. But during their conversation Jesus keeps completely wrong-footing Nicodemus because he knows that Nicodemus wants God on his own terms. Safe, rule-based. Predictable. Able to be accommodated within all of the Temple regulations. Abiding by tradition and precedent. God who can be kept in order, so that the Temple authorities can keep an orderly peace for the Romans, who are the ones really in charge.

But the God who so loved has a much bigger agenda than Nicodemus can imagine. This love encompasses not only God's chosen people, the Jews, but the whole world. This has always been the case, although God's people have not always been aware of it. God's love simply cannot be contained.

Isaiah too has an encounter with God. In his vision he sees God as thrice holy – "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts;" the angels say (Isaiah 6: 3). By contrast with Nicodemus, Isaiah's response is to know himself unholy, unclean – in need of the cleansing of his lips that is offered by the angel with the live coal. Once his sin is taken away, he responds to God's invitation to serve Him and to speak God's words to the people.

All through the ages, right down to you and me, people have been having encounters with God who is Trinity, God who is love.

God so loved. Just three words. How will we respond?

Blessing and honour and thanksgiving and praise,
more than we can utter, more than we can conceive,
be to you, most holy and glorious Trinity,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
by all angels, all people, all creatures, for ever and ever.
Amen