**27th May 2018**

**Romans 8.12-17; 1 Corinthians 12.1-11**

**Spiritual Gifts**

Today is Trinity Sunday when we consider the mystery of God and the Three in One – Father Son and Holy Spirit – how they relate as unity in diversity and how God loves the world. The Trinity is as much about how we encounter and experience God as about how we try to understand and make sense of the God we meet.

At the heart of the Trinity is love. The relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is Love. God is love. That’s why Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s sermon at the wedding of Harry and Megan last week about the redemptive power of love was also about the Trinity – though that word was never mentioned.

The media and Twitter has continued to reflect on THAT sermon. Never in recent times has a sermon caused so much comment or made so much impact. Which is great because the main talking point at the last Royal Wedding was Pippa Middleton’s bottom. This time round, many of the papers printed the transcript of Bishop Michael Curry’s sermon. If that isn’t progress I don’t know what is! Even when people didn’t like it, they were talking about it. Even atheists remarked that it was enough to bring them back into faith! When the gospel is preached – the power of God’s love – stuff happens. Mainly because our hearts yearn to be loved and to return to our Creator – because that’s who we are made for.

When we encounter the power of love, we meet God. When we accept that love, we become children, not slaves. When we enter into that love, we find light. When we rejoice in that Love, we discover eternal life.

God as love, God as Trinity, is present in every place and in every situation. That is easier to see at times of joy like a wedding. It can be harder to encounter God in dark times of tragedy like the Manchester attack or the Grenfell Tower fire, though there were many examples of the love of God shining through the love shown by the community.

The public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire began this week, and has been listening to [the stories of those who died](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/22/stories-died-grenfell-hillsborough-inquiry-victims) in the fire. Churches and faith groups played a big part in the immediate response to the tragedy last June. We have had personal testimony to that here in this congregation with the presence of Abigail Bolton and Pastor Derrick Wilson telling of their work with the survivors. The Bishop of Kensington made a commitment this week that the [Church would always be there](https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Bishop-of-Kensington-says-the-church-will-always-be-there-for-Grenfell-Tower-survivors) for the survivors.

We have many opportunities to meet God, and we will experience God in different ways, depending on the situation and on what’s going on in our own lives. But it’s still God.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The way God relates to us spills out into how we relate to the people around us, not condemning but caring, not enslaving but liberating, and bringing God’s glory into dark places.

Paul in the passage from Romans 8.12-17 talks about the spiritual transformation that takes place in people’s lives through the work of the Holy Spirit, as they come to realise what Christ has done for them and that God loves them. The Christian faith has often talked of being born again, born of the Spirit. It is a process of spiritual transformation – dying to an old way of living an old identity and being born into a new way of being and a new identity – into a life centred in God, in the Spirit, in Christ.

When we are born we are born into self-consciousness – a self-awareness of the distinction between ourselves and the world.

I heard a story about a four year old girl who was the first born and only child in her family until her mother gave birth again. Within a few hours of the parents bringing home a baby boy the girl made a request: She wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room. Her parents were a bit uneasy about this but they knew they had a good intercom system and they stood by the door just in case. So they let the little girl go into the baby’s room, shut the door, and raced over to the intercom. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the baby’s room and imagined her standing over the baby’s cot and then they heard her saying to her three day old brother, ‘Tell me about God – I’ve almost forgotten’.

The story is both haunting and evocative, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, still know this intuitively. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live and to whom we shall return.

As we grow up we become preoccupied with self-concern and can become quite self-centred. Our identity and way of being are more shaped by the ‘world’. The world of the child with its mystery and magic is left farther and farther behind. In adolescence we feel OK or not OK about ourselves to the extent that we measure up to the messages we get from the world. Appearance, achievement, affluence. Am I enough? Am I good enough? Those questions remain with us in adulthood. And throughout this process we fall farther into the world of separation and alienation, comparison and judgement – of self and of others. To use language from Frederick Buechner ‘we live our lives from the outside in, rather than from the inside out’.

Thus we need to be born again – born into the identity centred in the Spirit, in Christ, in God (the terms are interchangeable in this chapter you will notice – that’s why it is one of the set readings for Trinity Sunday. The whole Godhead is involved in our transformation). As the Christian life matures, we begin to experience the self-forgetfulness that accompanies a deepening trust in God. But it is a long and winding road – a road of many setbacks and some advances – of victories and defeats. It is a daily battle – hence Paul having to continually remind his readers in this letter of who they are, urging them to leave the life of the flesh behind and live in the Spirit.

The question of identity is not ‘who am I?’ but ‘whose am I?’ since identity always comes from acclaim and accreditation of someone outside of us, who- or whatever that source is - holds the title to our heart. We belong to them. We will get their approval only if we perform, and so our self-worth will vacillate wildly depending on how we are doing. We will be slaves. Paul says ‘*the Spirit you have received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again. Rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to son ship.’ Verse 15*

If we find our dignity in God through the Spirit, and we serve him, we will be free of enslavement because He grants us love on the basis of Jesus’ performance not ours. We can finally rest in our identity as his child.

The first picture Paul uses is that of adoption.

Friends of ours adopted two children. They had gone through the pain of childlessness and infertility. They had put up with insensitive comments and the bereavement of not being able to conceive. Yet their joy was great in receiving these children into their home. They had a sense of these children being a real gift to them, that they had longed to be parents and now finally they would get the chance. It seemed to make being a parent even more special for them.

Paul uses the illustration of adoption partly to describe the joy of God in adopting us but also the joy in us in knowing that we have been adopted – that we are loved by the heavenly father.

Paul writes that when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in a person’s heart the first sign is that they recognise God as Father. This I think is part of what Paul meant in chapter 5 verse 5 where he spoke of a love for God being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The cry ‘Abba , Father’ is nothing to do with Swedish pop groups but uses an old Aramaic word which Jesus himself had used for God (Mark 14.36) (An interesting link between Paul and Jesus). Paul uses the phrase to interpret what is going on in terms of the coming together of the Holy Spirit and our own spirit.

It is a delicate matter to describe, particularly because of political issues with gender exclusive language and the limitations of language to describe our experiences of God, but it is however a common Christian experience that while many of our thoughts in our mind seem to come from the ordinary flow of consciousness within us, sometimes we find other thoughts, which seem to come from somewhere else, hinting gently but powerfully at God’s love, at our calling to holiness, at particular tasks to which we must give energy and attention. A key part of Christian discipleship is to recognize that voice, and to nurture the facility of listening to it. It is, or may well be, the voice of God’s own spirit. And one of the primary things the Spirit says, with which we find our own spirit in full agreement, is that we are indeed God’s children, God’s adopted sons and daughters. But it is not always easy to think of God as close and intimate in the harsh world in which we live in.

That’s why it’s important to join together in worship in which we can listen again for God’s word to us and be reminded that we are loved no matter what gets thrown at us out there.

Paul in writing to the church in Corinth addresses a number of issues for that vibrant but chaotic congregation. Not least in chapters 11-14 he discusses what happens in their times of worship and how there should be good order and an opportunity to be built up in love. In chapter 11 he has discussed how they abuse the Lord’s Supper and let their divisions, especially between the rich and the poor, make a mockery of how they remember the Lord.

In chapters 12 -14 he tackles the use of spiritual gifts and the arrogance of some who think they are more spiritual and gifted than others. He uses the analogy of a body and how all the parts of the body have their use and none should be looked down on.

However, a clergy man who was preaching on the body of Christ went off message and drew attention to a few parts of the body which St Paul hadn’t mentioned. Some of the congregation were like the tonsils, he said, because ‘we’re no worse off when you’re gone’. Others were like the appendix: ‘we didn’t notice you were there until you started grumbling’. And others were like a set of false teeth, ‘sometimes in and sometimes out’.

I will be far more diplomatic and stick with Paul’s main point: we all have a role and a part to play. Chapter 13 is right in the middle of this section, that great sermon on love. It may be read at many weddings but it’s context is putting up with each other in a Christian congregation.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.****5****It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.****6****Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.****7****It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

Around this chapter is Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts. This is important because it is clear from Paul’s teaching that God wants to give gifts to his children for the building up of his family, the church. If we remain ignorant (don’t know anything about that) apathetic (can’t be bothered), fearful (oooh that all sounds scary and weird), or arrogant (we don’t’ need them) then we are questioning God’s judgement, we are being rude, proud, stupid and scared.

Pauls starts out:

***4****There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.****5****There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.****6****There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.*

***7****Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*

It’s all for the common good. To build one another up in love. To experience more of God’s love for us.

What are these gifts.? This list is not an exhaustive list. Later in this chapter he mentions a few more: healing, helping and guidance (verse 28). Elsewhere in scripture there are other lists of gifts including Romans 12 which additionally includes encouraging, teaching, serving, giving, leading, showing mercy.

What about this list?

***To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom,***

This is a gift that meets the need of the Christian community when knowledge and wisdom is required to make decisions or to choose proper course of action – we will be praying for that this Saturday as the Elders meet to discuss the future of the church and we as a church pray for wisdom seeking God’s future for us over these next few months as we draw up a plan to take us forward for the next ten years.

***to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,***

this could be linked to wisdom but could also have the divine dimension of taking something only God knows and communicating it with us. Some talk about a ‘word of knowledge’ that we couldn’t possible know but God reveals it to us.

I was reading an article about Jo Sexton a leadership coach and popular speaker. Shehas Nigerian roots but grew up in London. Her family and wider community had “scant resources”, Jo recalls how many of her friends were children of drug dealers and addicts.

Her own family life was not straightforward, as she spent time in foster care and only met her father three times. But in the interview she told how a word of knowledge in church helped her: she writes:

*God came to me…I didn’t get there; I was clueless. It was 1990 at St Mark’s Church in Kennington, and someone had given a prophetic word-based plea about somebody not knowing who the Father was and it just undid me. Because God saw fit in among a few hundred people to highlight my life.*

*It wasn’t even that I felt special; I felt known and seen. I felt for a lot of life – either through my own personal circumstances or the circumstances of the culture – I was not being seen for who I was and therefore not being valued – and it was this moment where the King of kings said, “I see you.” He said, “I see your story. I see your pain. I see your history. I see your grief. And I see how you’ve got on with it and it matters to me. It matters to me that you’ve been through this.” It just undid so much junk, and even after that there has been an ongoing process of getting to know God as my Father. He’s been very persistent in helping me understand.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Just a word spoken in church made a difference to Jo Sexton’s life.

Paul continues with his list of spiritual gifts:

***9to another faith by the same Spirit,***

Not saving faith, which all Christians possess, but faith to meet a specific need within the Body of Christ.

***to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,***

literally means gifts of healings which suggests different kinds of illnesses and the various ways God heals them and how some people seem to have a special gift for praying for healing, or helping people who are ill find hope and peace.

***10to another miraculous powers,***

In scripture miracles are events that in the eyes of those experienced and or witnessed them clearly evidenced God’s power purposefully at work beyond the usual or the expected.

***to another prophecy,***

prophecy can be a message imparted to the believer by the Holy Spirit. It may be a prediction (c.f. Agabus Acts 11.28, 21.10-11) or an indication of the will of God in a given situation.

***to another distinguishing between spirits,***

since there can be false prophecies that come from either our own selfish motives or even from evil sources this gift is necessary in order for the church to distinguish the true from the false (c.f. 1 John 4.1-6)

***to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians+12&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28645a)***] and to still another the interpretation of tongues.***

The Greek word for tongues literally means languages or dialects. Some understand it to refer to the ability to speak human languages not learned but others such as the Apostles did on the day of Pentecost. Others believe that it refers to both earthly and heavenly languages, including the ecstatic languages of praise and prayer. Paul goes on to talk further about the use of tongues in chapter 14 about its benefit for private use and private prayer but not in public worship as it’s unedifying and would certainly need an interpretation.

Finally Paul sums up:

***All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.***

Which reminds us that The Holy Spirit sovereignly determines which gift or gifts each believer should have. We of course can resist the Spirit or quench the Spirit or fear the Spirit – all those are expressions Paul uses in his writings to describe people’s reaction to the work of the Spirit. But he reminds the church in this passage that we are not left alone, not left without power to be the Body of Christ. Not left without the ability for God’s love to be experienced in so many powerful ways.

On this Trinity Sunday we are reminded of the fullness of the experience and encounter with God. This is all about experiencing God, encountering God and being blessed with the power of God’s love. There is power in love as Bishop Michael kept banging on about at the Royal Wedding. The Holy Spirit comes with power, the power of God, the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit brings gifts in order to build us up in love. Let’s be open to the work of God in our lives, our church and our world.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1. Meg Gilley, Roots Material <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/trinity-sunday/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2018/May-2018/Jo-Saxton-Why-you-need-to-be-twice-as-good-to-survive-as-a-black-woman> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)