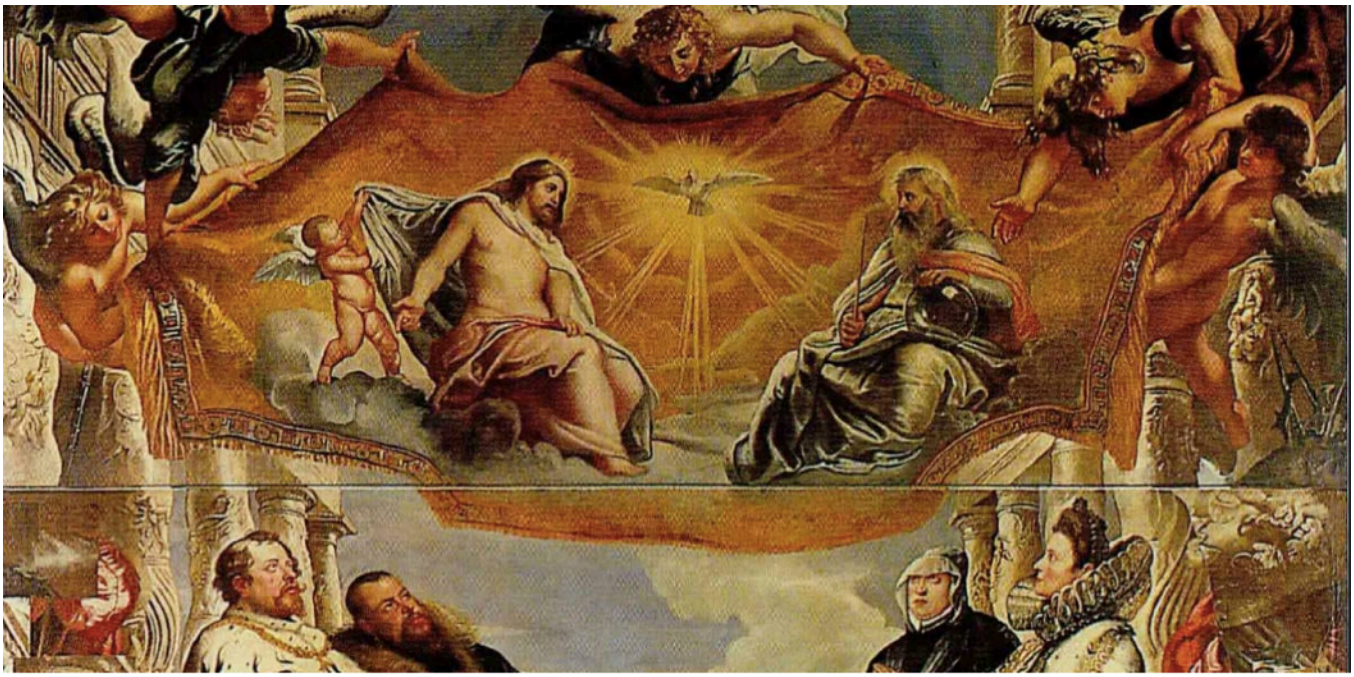
A Blesséd Mystery

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 4 June 2023

Genesis 1:1-2:4 • Psalm 8 • Matthew 28:16-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on which we recognise the essential nature of our God as one being in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is a mystery which people have discussed and struggled with and tried to understand for about two thousand years. Preachers have tried to explain it for centuries. Church councils have been held and creeds have been issued to try to formulate the mystery for us all. Senior pastors have for generations gladly assigned the preaching duties on Trinity Sunday to junior pastors, while they themselves sat in the pews, happy not to be the ones trying to explain the Trinity.

This is all very well. But how can it be that the very being of God, our Creator, our Father, our Care-giver, our Comforter, to whom we pray daily and sing songs of praise, is essentially unknown to us? I don't believe it is. I believe we do know our God. I don't mean to say that we know all about God — far from it. We would have to have the wisdom of God, which is all the wisdom in the world and beyond, to know him fully. That wisdom is not given to us, at least in this world. And in

fact, we don't need to know the full explanation. We can have faith that God has given us what we need to know.

We spoke last week about the Holy Spirit, as we celebrated the coming of the Spirit to the disciples on the first Pentecost. We spoke about the Spirit being eternal with God and Christ, and indeed, in today's lectionary we go back to the beginning of the world's creation. It is, by the way, the world's creation we are talking about when we say, like Genesis, "In the beginning." It was not the beginning of God; God has always been. "The beginning" is the beginning of our history, of the world and the sun and the moon and the stars. The Spirit was with God, hovering over the waters, waiting for and aiding in the creation. Likewise, as we know from John's Gospel, the Word was there, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all was made. We may say that the world and all that is in it was made by God, through Jesus Christ, with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Is that helpful for our understanding of the Trinity? It is a simplified explanation; if you want to know the exact process by which God did this creating, then Genesis does not really provide the answers.

But on the other hand, it was never meant to. Genesis is not a blow-by-blow report of creation. It is not an eye-witness or scientific account. Rather, think of Genesis as a Gospel. I have the theologian Walter Brueggemann to thank for this idea. In his commentary on Genesis he writes, "[it] is important to hear this text as a declaration of the gospel … The text is none other than the voice of the [evangelist] proclaiming good news."

Genesis tells the Good News of God's creation. It is the good news of a loving God who wanted us and created us to be his own people, to love us and care for us. He loves us so much that he gives us this world, with all its oceans and rivers and mountains and creatures and beauty and grandeur, not to mention the sun and the moon and the stars above. God wants us to be happy in the world he has created.

Genesis shows us a people trying to live in the love and light of God, with more or less of success. Adam and Eve disobey God's commands, and the world changes. But it is not taken away; God still loves his creation, including those stubborn humans. When they fail again, God re-creates and starts again with Noah and his family. When humanity still turns away from God, he sends his Son to show us the path to redemption. The entire Bible is a connected story of God's constant love and humankind's history of faith and betrayal, a Gospel of good news for all of us.

And it is a story of the Trinity. God made the world through Jesus with the aid of the Spirit. The Spirit continues to work in the world throughout the Old Testament period, guiding Moses and his people through the wilderness, consoling the psalmist who confesses his transgressions (Psalm 51:11), and giving Ezekiel the words to say to Israel, telling them of the mercy of God (Ezekiel 36:27). Jesus, who was present at the Creation, continues to sit at God's right hand, waiting for his blessed birth as a man and his mission of salvation.

In our Matthew reading today, we see the end of the story of Jesus's incarnation, as he tells the Eleven to go out and make disciples in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. In what follows, we see the working of the Trinity in our ongoing relationship with God: the Spirit helps us to pray to the Son, who intercedes for us with the Father.

Our forms of blessing, as part of our liturgy, speak to an understanding of the Trinity. I usually bless the congregation in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but I may also say Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, or more colloquially, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver. Each of these speaks to the actions of the three persons of the Trinity, yet all are one and all are God.

Ah — there it is! All are one, and all are God. How can they all be one? How can they be one substance, to use the language of the Nicene Council, yet be in three persons? That is and will remain the mystery. But I think it's most important for us as Christians to understand what the Trinity means in light of God's promise to us. Jesus did not leave us bereft when he ascended into heaven. He left the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter and Guide, the one who would continue to remind us of all the things Jesus said when he was here, and to serve with Jesus as our channel to the Father. This is not a mystery — Jesus told us this plainly before his ascension, and we have his words as reported by Luke and Paul's testimony to the Spirit's continuing intercession on our behalf.

As Paul writes in First Corinthians:

> "What no eye has seen,
> what no ear has heard,
> and what no human mind has conceived"—
> the things God has prepared for those who love him—
>
> these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.
>
> The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God … [and] no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. (1 Cor 2:9-12)

So do not be concerned if you do not understand completely how one can be three, and three can be one. It is not given us to understand that — yet. It is enough that we know the God loves us and created us; that Jesus walked among us; and that the Spirit remains with us to guide us in all things. We know that God's love for us is great, beyond anything we can imagine, and Jesus has blessed us with the Holy Spirit, so that God is never farther away from us than our own breath, which is inside us and sustains us, as God does — this day and always. Amen.