

Sermon Trinity 2017 11.06.17
I John 4:7-16 St John's Church Julian Templeton

“God is love.” (I Jn. 4:16) So writes the author of the First Letter of John. My message today is that God is love *because* God is Trinity. When we say ‘God is love’ we mean that within the one being of God, the persons of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit love one another. The Father and the Son are not male; the Holy Spirit is not female; rather they are the differentiated and personal modes of being of the one God. God is personal and loving to the power of three. God is the loving communion of Father and Son and Spirit. This means that love is not an abstract quality for God; love is integral and personal.

We could take the statement “God is love” and reverse it to say ‘Love is God’. But as beguiling as this might be for those brought up on the Beatles’ song: “All you need is love”, it would miss the mark. And it would miss the mark because it suggests that love comes first and is something that God decides to adopt. Whereas it is the other way round: God comes first and love is something that *God is and does*. It would be closer to the mark to gloss the Beatles lyric and say: ‘All you need is God’ but one suspects that such a gloss would not have found favour with John Lennon, at least (judging by the lyrics of his song ‘Imagine’). Yet to say ‘All you need is God’ would affirm that *God* is he who loves, and does so eternally. God is loving-fellowship in himself and seeks loving-fellowship with creation. And God seeks loving-fellowship with others not out of any need or lack—for as Trinity, God is complete in himself—rather, God seeks loving-fellowship from a position of fullness: as an expression of the overflow of his love.

It is somewhat surprising that the compilers of the *Revised Common Lectionary* did not include the reading that was read to us from I John 4 in any of the three cycles of readings for Trinity Sunday. Arguably this reading contains a nascent understanding of God as Trinity that flows from the writer’s experience of God’s love. He writes of the experience he shares with other believers of having the Spirit imparted to dwell in them, and, as a consequence, of their becoming witnesses that, “...the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the World.” (4:13-14) Note that the *experience of the Spirit* impels witness to the Father and the Son. This would suggest that it was as a direct result of the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit that the early Church began to think about God in a Trinitarian way.

The writer urges his readers to love one another because the source of all love is God. When we love we do so by drawing from God’s loving energy. “Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.” (4:7) By contrast “...the unloving know nothing of God, for God is love.” (8) This contrast between the loving and the unloving encourages us to put all of our differences into perspective—differences of political allegiance, differences of moral conviction—by asking ourselves the question: does my difference of opinion with the other person arise from the motivation of love or from its opposite? Significantly, the opposite of love in the First Letter of John is not, in the first instance, hate, but *fear*. As the author later writes: “...fear has to do with punishment, and anyone who is afraid has not attained to love in its perfection.” (18) I think we can all recognise that that when we are afraid or anxious we do not always act in as loving a way as we would wish. When we are defensive we are often not at our best (think about the last time you were in an argument). When we think we are being judged or punished, we are more likely to react

by judging or punishing others. Yet the author has a solution to the fear of judgment and the judgmental attitude it often produces. It derives from the very nature of God as love, and, by implication, from the nature of God as Trinity. “We love because [God] first loved us.” (19)

God demonstrated his love by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him (9).

‘This is what love really is: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins’ (10).

We begin to understand that love is first of all a *liberating action that God initiates*. God takes the initiative in the person of Jesus. He puts a large full stop beside all the quarrelsome claims and counter-claims of who has wronged whom. In the person of his Son, God takes upon *himself* the judgment that should be ours. Jesus, who has committed no sin, dies on the cross for all sinners. His sacrificial death makes atonement for our sins. And this death is reconciling, it effects at-one-ment, by removing the sin that divides and destroys. Now we are all the same: there is none better, none worse, in the sight of God. We are all and each sinners whom God loves and redeems in Jesus.

In the current febrile post-election political atmosphere of a hung parliament and consequent manoeuvring and deal-making—an atmosphere that may have reached even the hitherto ‘safe’ constituency of Chipping Barnet—I think we all recognise that out of the current division we will need to find a pragmatic unity for the common good of the nation.

We might also put our current political turmoil into perspective by looking, as the author of Psalm 8 did, skywards. God is the Sun around which we orbit and we are the planets and satellites that are maintained in God’s orbit by the attractive power of his love. Giving the same metaphor a Trinitarian twist, we could say that the Father is the Sun burning with love; Jesus is light and heat that proceeds from the Sun and reaches us in orbit; and the Spirit is the effect of light that illuminates us and heat that energizes us.

God’s active love proceeds *from* the Father *through* the Son *in* the Spirit and finds its reply when Creation responds with joyful love *in* the Spirit *through* the Son *to* the Father. The statement of belief that God is love *because* God is Trinity would suggest that within God’s triune life the differing functions of the Father and the Son and the Spirit are no obstacle to unity but are the manner in which God’s unity of purpose and action is expressed. So also the Church, at its best, is a creaturely analogy of the same truth: the church’s unity of purpose is expressed through a diversity of persons. Using a bodily analogy the Apostle Paul puts it this way: “...we who are united with Christ, though many, form one body, and belong to one another as its limbs and organs.” (Rom. 12:5) As God’s unity is expressed through differentiated persons; as the Church’s unity is expressed through its various members; so we must hope and pray that with the current fragmentation of political opinion as manifested in the hung parliament, our newly elected and re-elected representatives will be able to find at least a pragmatic unity of purpose in the service of the nation’s common good as it renegotiates its relationship with the EU.