

TRINITY SUNDAY (31st MAY 2015)

ROMANS ch8 vv12 - 17

JOHN ch3 vv1 - 17

[Note: (1) The passages, numbers &c in square brackets will not be preached; I have included them for completeness;

(2) Angela Tilby wrote in this week's Church Times:- " Preachers are supposed to roll their eyes in horror at the thought of preaching on the Trinity". If my eyes roll you'll know why; the horror has struck!!]

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

Today is Trinity Sunday and that collocation of words, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is to be found nowhere in the New Testament except in St Matthew's Gospel - in fact in the penultimate verse (c28 v19). That this collocation should be found in a Gospel (and thus relating to events before the first Pentecost (Whitsun) is most surprising for even after the first Pentecost we are told in Acts (c2 v38) that Peter replying to a question from the people present on that astonishing day asking what they ought to do, were told by him:-

"Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" - Peter did not mention either the "Father" or the "Holy Spirit".

But both statements use the expression "In the name of" - which was an important phrase to be found in Psalm 124 [v 8] where it is used as meaning:- "in the possession and protection of". Verse 8 of that Psalm tells us that:-

"Our help is in the name of the Lord". But I'll come back to these ideas later.

Christianity is, of course, completely unique, but one of the characteristics that make it unique is that it grew out of, and is based upon, historical events relating not only to Jesus but also His followers. Thus every Christian child knows almost from his or her first words one of those events. No such child is likely to forget the birth of Christ (which we celebrate on what we call Christmas Day (it doesn't matter that we don't know the exact day or month - the important fact is that he was born)). We also celebrate (if that is the right word) or perhaps I should say, remember with intense grief and shame, His Crucifixion and Death (on Good Friday) and, with joy, not only His Resurrection (on Easter Day) but also what we celebrated last Sunday - the coming of the Holy Spirit (at Pentecost - which falls, as Margaret reminded us last Sunday, 50 days after Easter). And we remember Saints especially Martyrs of whom our very own Martyr St Stephen was the first - remembered on the day following Christmas - doubtless intended to bring us down to earth with a remembrance of the potential hardness of a Christian life. But Trinity is AN exception - not the only exception [think of Michaelmas] - but a very important exception. So far as concerns "Trinity" there is no historical event to which it can be traced - it just seems to have been recognised as a fact virtually

since the Birthday of the Church on the first Whitsun. The fact of the Trinity and its importance is recognised in the Collect for today - Trinity Sunday. It appears first in the 1st Prayer Book of Edward VI and was probably written by Cranmer (of whom our former Vicar Owen Thomas said: - he knew that he had to get it right because, if he didn't, he would have been burnt at the stake for heresy). This collect for Trinity reads:-

"Almighty and everlasting God,
who has given us, YOUR servants, grace,
by the confession of a true faith,
to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and,
in the power of the divine majesty, to worship the Unity;
we beseech you that you will keep us steadfast in this faith
and evermore defend us from all adversaries;
who livest and reignest one God, now and forever."

AMEN

That I think is good theology; but does it stir you? Hands up those who were stirred? [Perhaps Angela Tilby was right]
And those not stirred?

Now try this Collect (from the same book and still in use) for size. (I'll tell you which Sunday it celebrates after you've heard it):-

"Almighty God, you
have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts,
whereby we call you Father;
Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to Your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God
through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who is alive
and reigns with You
in the Unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever. AMEN"

Anyone know for which Sunday that Collect was written? In fact it is the 3rd Sunday after Trinity [Remember to come that day]. It seems to me to be not only gloriously Trinitarian (referring not only to God but also to his three elements of Father, Son and Holy Spirit but is also encouraging and uplifting and likely to make Mary Allen stand up and shout HALLELUJAH!!!

So let's see how it fits our Gospel and Epistle readings for today.

In John c3 we have the first of 3 occasions in John where Nicodemus plays a part. The second is in John 7 [vv45-53] where Nicodemus speaks in the Sanhedrin protesting that Jesus must not be condemned without first hearing what He might have to say in his own defence [a good principle of Human Rights long before the Court of Human Rights was established]. And thirdly in John 19 (vv38 - 42) when

he joined Joseph of Arimathea (a secret disciple) in burying the body of Jesus after Joseph had obtained permission from Pilate to take Jesus' body down from the cross. So Nicodemus was almost certainly an admirer of Jesus and the reason for him visiting Jesus at night might have been, contrary to the view I formed many years ago, not a desire that he should not be seen but to have more time with Jesus.

The conversation, as reported by John, probably appears to us to be somewhat stilted. Nicodemus, kicks off by saying:-

"We know that you are a teacher from God because if that were not so, you wouldn't do these "signs" (ie miracles).

We don't know who the "we" are. If it is not the royal "we", it seems most likely that Nicodemus was referring to himself and his fellow Pharisees (because strict religionists like the Pharisees would not associate with an ordinary Jew, let alone a gentile, for fear of contamination). That is an interesting thought.

Jesus' response ignores Nicodemus' attempt to find out who He was. Instead Jesus talks about the need for "rebirth" if a person is to see or enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaching, as foretold by his cousin John was that the Kingdom of Heaven or God was not just near but at hand. It is, I understand, not clear from the Greek whether Jesus was requiring a person to be "born again" or "from above" - but the essence is clear. What He was requiring was transformation of life. The outside sign of the intention to be transformed was and is baptism (Jesus himself had insisted on cousin John baptising him as John's Gospel tells us in Chapter 1 (vv29ff). That baptism would have been total immersion in the River Jordan - an experience akin to drowning) and in Jesus' case it was accompanied by the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and alighting on Jesus. That was indeed a baptism by "Water and the Spirit" and that is what Jesus was telling Nicodemus - namely that for someone to enter the Kingdom he or she must be baptised by water (a near drowning experience) and the Spirit. Such a baptism had to be public and perhaps it was a rebuke to Nicodemus for not being open in his support of, and adherence to, Jesus.

From our point of view, on Trinity Sunday, the importance of the story is the link between God the Father (in heaven) and God the Son (on earth) provided by the sending and arrival of the Holy Spirit - blowing where it wills (no one knowing whence it came nor where it was to go). But our Trinitarian passage from John's Gospel does not end with the link between the Father and the Son provided by the descent of Holy Spirit. We must remember what is called the "Test Verse" (v16) that:-

"God SO loved the world that He GAVE His ONLY SON - that is a part of God's very self - that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life".

This sermon in its original form then went on to consider the set passage from Romans; but Romans is a very difficult book and I have decided to leave that part of my sermon out- but if you would like to read it, it is in the sermon on-line.

[So now we must proceed to Paul's Letter to the Romans - Paul's longest and weightiest letter probably written between AD 54 & 58. That is before any of the Gospels were in written form (and remember that John's Gospel was probably written last - possibly as late as AD 90 - 100). Nicholas King, a recent translator of the NT, says of Romans that it is Paul's "longest and most influential letter [which] is also very hard going and [makes translation] formidably difficult. As an example he points to one passage which can be translated in at least 11 different ways; but he adds that the Letter is "enormously worth reading".

At the end of his commentary on vv 9 - 11 of Chap 8 King writes:-
"At this point the reader may ... want to start asking who is the Spirit?"

To understand our passage (vv 12 - 17) we need to know what life expectations were like in a typical Roman or Greek household (remember Paul was a Greek Jew but also a Roman Citizen). Firstly life was usually quite short - certainly so by our standards. Living to 40 would have been thought quite a long life. On the death of the Father (the paterfamilias) the eldest son would expect to inherit everything (though he would have responsibilities for the whole household). The widow, siblings and their wives and children and slaves would have no legal title to anything. But childlessness and adoption was quite common to deal with - and it was certainly not unknown for a slave to be adopted and made the heir. This I think explains vv 15 - 17:-

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but you received the spirit of sonship. When we cry "Abba! Father!" because it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God [ie the Father], and if children then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ [ie the only Son] provided we suffer [ie emulate him daily by taking up our cross and lovingly trying to serve others as fellow children of God] with Him in order that we may be glorified with Him"].

So I ask you to join me as I finish by saying, together, that traditional blessing which I started with and what some times seems like a "starting gun":-

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen" and let us add:-

Let us bless the Lord!

Thanks be to God. Amen