

Trinity

During the past week there has been a lot of press coverage on our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry after his royal wedding sermon, including a skit on Saturday Night Live and an appearance on the Today show. One story in my news feed came from a fellow Dean, Penny Bridges in San Diego. On Pentecost Sunday she asked how many in her cathedral had shown up because of Michael Curry's sermon. Three women in the back raised their hands.

Another post I saw was a video link to an interview with Bishop Curry and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who actually married the royal couple. Welby is British, of course, and British reporters were especially interested in what he thought of the sermon. At one point Welby said that it "blew the place open." During a question about its "unconventional" nature, one could see Welby's mind working. He gave a wonderful response. "There's nothing conventional about Christianity," he said. He went on to say how unconventional Jesus and his followers were. Personally, I'd like that to be the new motto of the Episcopal Church – "There's nothing conventional about Christianity." That doesn't mean change for change's sake, but rather a constant reminder that God is always calling us to the places where we are least comfortable, because those are the places where the world hurts most, where God most desires healing and reconciliation.

This post-wedding energy and enthusiasm fit in well with the coming of the Holy Spirit last week on Pentecost. It's a week later, however, and you may wonder, what now? How do we maintain that energy, especially on Trinity Sunday, that day we celebrate something that is so hard to get one's head around? Fortunately, you have a preacher who gets excited about the Trinity.

One reason I'm excited today is that we heard three great Bible passages – the dramatic call of Isaiah, the fabulous eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, and poor, hapless Nicodemus, who gets hopelessly entangled in a conversation with Jesus. Today we get to see how each one has the Trinity embedded in it.

Let's start with the last passage, from the Gospel of John. On the surface it's all about Jesus, the Son of God. Nicodemus has come to Jesus because of all of the signs that point toward his power. But Nicodemus hedged his bets. He came by night lest he be seen by his fellow Pharisees. In John's Gospel, depending on signs and walking in darkness are wrong paths, and sure enough, Nicodemus quickly loses his way. When Jesus says one must be born from above or born again (the Greek word can mean either), Nicodemus chooses the wrong meaning and compounds his error by taking it literally. When Jesus uses a word that can mean either wind or spirit, Nicodemus makes the wrong choice again. Eventually he disappears entirely from the story as its context widens. Soon we are in post-crucifixion, post-ascension time when God has already given his Son for the world and the Son of Man has ascended into heaven. John's Gospel is famous for stepping back and forth from eternity to real time, which can make it hard to follow.

On the other hand, that's just like God, isn't it? God exists in eternity but encounters us in real time and in real lives. The Son of God, as Jesus Christ, lived and died and rose again in real time. In the passage we heard this morning, Jesus connected himself to those born of the Spirit and to the God who so loved the world. Yes, the story is about Jesus, the Son of God, but in subtle yet clear ways we see God the Father and God the Holy Spirit acting through Jesus.

Just as John's Gospel has a surface focus on the Son of God, the passage from Romans is clearly about spirit. Paul talks about our own inner spirit as well as the Spirit of God, what we call the Holy Spirit, that leads us to become children of God. I never tire of pointing out that we are sealed by that Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. But notice how Paul describes the working of the Holy Spirit within us. It bears witness when we cry out to God as Father. It speaks for us when we are at a loss for words – too deep in sorrow or too overcome with joy. It makes us joint heirs with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is there – and so are God the Father and God the Son.

And then we come to Isaiah. His story reminds me of the 10:30 service last week, when we had incense ascending with our prayers. Isaiah was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem, also amidst great clouds of incense. Through the smoke he had a vision of God as Lord, sitting high on a throne. God's enormous robe filled the Temple. Fiery seraphim attended him and the whole place shook. Isaiah was scared to death. Then he saw one of the seraphim bring a hot coal from the altar, touch his lips, and release him from sin. When God asked for someone to send, Isaiah was ready. He gave that profound, simple answer: "Here am I; send me."

This vision, however you understand it, clearly establishes God as Lord, as Creator, as Sovereign over all the earth. One might say it is God the Father on an IMAX screen. Where could the Trinity be here? Well, one place could be that little word *us*, as in "Who will go for *us*?" Isaiah surely was not thinking Trinity when he wrote it. This divine "us" shows up in other parts of the Old Testament, including Genesis. And yet, from a Christian perspective, it is hard not to see that "us" as an intimation of the larger understanding of God revealed to us through Jesus Christ. If we do believe in the Trinity, then God the Son as Word must be present when God the Father speaks, and the power of God the Holy Spirit must be filling Isaiah when the hot coal touches his mouth. It is that Spirit which enables him to say, "Here am I; send me."

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. They are present in each of those passages. They are also here among us. Soon we will say those words the seraphim use in the very presence of God: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The glory of God is here in this transcendent space, which testifies to God's mystery. God the Son will come to us in bread and wine. God the Holy Spirit moves in and around and through us. Each of them is present. Each of them gives us the grace to say "Here am I; send me."

No, there's nothing conventional about Christianity. It grounds us in eternity, connects us with mystery, and causes us to do things that make no sense to the world. "How can these things be?" asked Nicodemus. They can be because we follow a God who dared to come to earth and suffer for us, who spent more time with the outcast than with those in power, who broke open the gates of death, and who calls us to new life. Today, on Trinity Sunday, be filled with the grace of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God calls you to the places where the world hurts. So go and take the deep love and joy of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Go in the power of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[Trinity Sunday: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17.]