

"The Strong Name of the Trinity"

Trinity Sunday Sermon

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Cashmere Presbyterian Church, 22 May 2016

Bible Readings: John 16:12-15

Romans 5:1-5

I bind unto myself today
the strong name of the Trinity
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
The power of God to hold and lead,
The wisdom of my God to teach,
The word of God to give me speech.

We are talking today about the Trinity, specifically how the ancient Celtic tradition helps us relate to the Trinity. Do you understand what I mean by 'Celtic tradition'? It is one of the great and enduring streams within the Christian church over the past 2 millenia.

By the collapse of the Roman Empire the church had spread through much of the known world, and as it did so it soaked into the cultures where it grew. So to the south and east it became the Orthodox tradition, with its icons, strong sense of community, worship traditions in the Greek, chanted worship that flows on and over you like a river.

Based from Rome was of course the Roman Catholic Church, with its popes and bishops, which we tend to think of as a rational, legalistic kind of faith, with many arguments over points of doctrine, strong insistence on orthodoxy and authority.

But over in the West, particularly in Britain, the Celtic church integrated many features of pre-Christian spirituality, such as respect for nature, women in leadership, an emphasis on hospitality, and a preference for mystery over doctrine. The rediscovery of Celtic spirituality in the last 50 years has played an important part in rejuvenating faith for many people, especially those not so interested in academic debates about God, or in attempts to persuade other people that they are wrong and we are right.

I grew up in a Methodist family. My father was a lay preacher, a missionary teacher. Strong pacifist stock, my father willing to go to jail rather than violate his convictions about the claim of Christ. My mother's parents worked tirelessly for the good of others, especially the families of other pacifists, but also local communities and of course the local church. I grew up with a strong sense of faith in action. Faith was about doing what was right.

What kind of church tradition do you come from? Did it matter more to believe the right thing or to do the right thing? What kind of convictions guided your parents' decisions and priorities? What do you remember about the church you went to as a young person? What kind of images did you have of God?

It is fascinating to talk to someone who has decided that they don't believe in God. Ask them what kind of God they don't believe in ... and you'll probably quite agree with them! It grieves me that many people grew up with a God used as a tool of social control ... God

the wagging finger, God the watching eye in the sky who would punish you if you were bad.

It grieves me that many people grew up, as my mother did, feeling that God expected so much of her, that faith was about working hard and that you can never quite do enough, you'll never quite be good enough! This God has high hopes for us but is often disappointed in us.

It grieves me that many people grew up with a God who was distant, an intellectual idea, abstract values of truth, perfection; the clock-maker God who made the world, wound it up then stepped back and left it to its own devices. A God unrelated to the mess and complexities of everyday living.

If you had to pick one of these three images of God from when you were young, which would it be?

God with a frown and a wagging finger, disapproving?

God with a sigh of disappointment?

God way away up there, disconnected?

Somehow as I young woman I discovered in myself a drive to know more about God. Somehow this mattered to me, in a way that it didn't matter to my sister and many of my friends. This desire in me took me into a wonderfully rich diversity of places and churches and conversations. I was amazingly blessed as a young person, given wonderful opportunities and experiences.

I was confirmed in the Waiwhetu Methodist church. I worked as a lay chaplain at Victoria university for a year. I spent a month in Korea learning about liberation theology with Student Christian Movement. In my 5 years as National Methodist Youth Co-ordinator I was involved in the church at every level in every region. I found in the Anglican church a quality of stillness and worship that nourished my faith in a different way from the more activist Methodist church. I went with a group of Anglicans on a pilgrimage, with an amazing Easter week at Taize, and visits to Assisi, and special places in England.

It was a particularly beautiful memorable day when we went to Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne, Holy Island, on the north-east coast of England. Way back in 634 St Aidan set up a retreat centre there, and over the centuries it was an important base for Christian prayer, study and mission.

It made such an impression on me, just being there. As a New Zealander, everything here is so young, a mere 200 years of faith history. To stand under arches that date back 1400 years is to claim your place in a long long story of faith. The truth of the gospel is not a modern fad. yes we need to reinvent it and reimagine it in every generation, but it is far far older than us and its truth and power will outlive us. It may not be all about us at all.

The lovely thing about rediscovering the Celtic faith is that the ancient prayers and writings of people such as St Aidan ring true in 2016. There is a resonance about them that translates well, because they invite us into an earthy intimacy with God. We find in these prayers a way to relate to God that is very different from either the intellectual faith or the moral activism that many of us grew up with.

Here's a quote from an American minister Jan Richardson:

Historically, Celtic Christians offered no systematic theology by which they sought to define the nature and work of Trinity, but evidence of their experience of the triune God abounds. Beyond their artistic and symbolic depictions of the Trinity, they left a remarkable body of prayers and poetry that offer us an incarnate experience of the Trinity. In their poems and prayers, Celtic Christians moved from the abstract to the actual; for them, the triune deity was not a theological concept but rather was deeply embedded in daily life. In the Celtic imagination, God, Christ, and Spirit are intertwined with one another and with all of creation.
(www.paintedprayerbook.com)

The intimacy of faith in everyday life comes through in prayers and songs such as the one we just listened to, or in 'Be thou my vision' ... part of who I am, close as breathing ...

God be in my mind and in my understanding
God be in my eyes and in my seeing
God be in my heart and in my relating ...

Or this night prayer:

I lie down this night with God
And God will lie down with me.
I lie down this night with Christ
And Christ will lie down with me.
I lie down this night with Spirit
And Spirit will lie down with me.
The Three of my love
will be lying down with me.

This kind of intimacy is shocking to an intellectual faith, and is down-right scary if your God is a threatening accusing one. This is a homely God, a safe God, a close God, a tender, familiar, lovely God. Three names within one name, like a friend that you call by three different nicknames, or a bed with three pillows, or a room with three doors.

What do you think about this? Does this resonate with your soul or does it sound wrong or even dangerous?

This is from Lynne Baab's writing:

The image of three in one is found frequently in Celtic art and poetry. Analogies from nature and daily life permeate the Celtic poems about the Trinity:

*Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
Three joints of the finger, but still only one finger fair,
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,
Frost, snow-flakes and ice, all water their origin share,
Three Persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer.*

Sometimes Celtic poems go on at length about the Holy Three, but some are brief and vivid, like this one:

O Father who sought me
O Son who bought me
O Holy Spirit who taught me.

In a Celtic way of seeing, then, the Trinity is a unity, three in one, one in three, and the classic symbol of this is the Celtic knot. The string woven into itself so that it has no start point or frayed ends, no cut-off and no split. The patterns, whether made with actual rope, carved into a stone cross or drawn into a Bible manuscript, are a continuous line that weaves into itself and around again, spirals in and out.

So this is our metaphor for God for this week, the Celtic knot. And my invitation to you is to focus for this week on how God is an interconnected whole. Put aside for a while your puzzlings about how God can be Father, Son and Spirit ... we'll come back to that again from a historical perspective next month. For now, just hold in your mind and soul this teasing twisting robe that has no beginning and no end.

You have some pictures of these in your bulletins. Have you heard of this trendy thing called colouring in for adults? It is actually very prayerful and restful ... so I invite you to find those coloured pencils that are buried somewhere in your house and to sit down and quietly colour in the Celtic knot pictures. Or, draw your own patterns. Enjoy some doodling, and let your understanding of God as three-in-one come out onto the page.

Before I finish, let's focus for a moment on two of the key Bible verses from our readings today.

Romans 5:5 God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

John 16:15 All that the Father has is mine ... and the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Both of these texts describe a flow of ... of what? Paul calls it 'love'. John casts the net as wide as he possibly can in the world "all" - you can't get bigger than that! "All that the Father has"

John fleshes this out with other words, "truth", "glory"

and John describes the process of this flow as being "declaring", proclaiming, speaking on to someone else what you have heard, or "guiding", the Spirit showing us something that he has been shown ... active verbs, leading somewhere, purposeful.

Paul's verb is "pouring out", which also is active, purposeful, leading us into peace with God, access to grace, bold hope, sharing in glory, which changes us, bringing fruit out in our lives or endurance, character, enduring bold hope.

The Trinity is a continuous action by a dynamic loving power, which invites us and involves us in the dynamic love that flows between the three agents of a single being. The gift of the Celtic is to invite us to move closer into this flow of relationship that is God the Trinity, the Three in One, trusting that this God is not distant, but close, claiming that this God is not judgmental or critical but kindly, daring us to believe that this God is with us, and for us, at home with us. This is the Strong Name of the Trinity that we bind unto ourselves this day.

Prayer of St Patrick

***I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.***

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.

***I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.***