

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Trinity Sunday – Year C

RCL Readings – Isaiah 6:1-7; Psalm 29; Revelation 4:1-11; John 16:5-15

ACNA Readings – Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Introduction. The Feast of the Holy Trinity, also called Trinity Sunday, is celebrated in the Western Church on the Sunday after Pentecost and has been marked on this day since at least the 10th century. Thomas Becket is credited with obtaining permission for the churches in England to observe Trinity Sunday on the Sunday after Pentecost, the anniversary of his consecration as the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Pope John XXII made it a churchwide feast in 1334.

Common Theme. The readings point to God enthroned in heaven as sovereign over all creation with readings hinting at the tri-unity of the God of Israel. The Gospel passage is an intimate section of teaching by Jesus about the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 6:1-7. The people had mocked the “*Holy One of Israel*” (5:19) but, through Isaiah’s call and his subsequent prophetic ministry, this mockery and lack of faith would be challenged and those promoting such mockery will be called to account. The call comes in the year King Uzziah died (740 B.C.).

This dating by a death is unique – no other prophet does this – but Isaiah does it twice, once here and again in 14:28. King Uzziah is in many ways a righteous and good king yet as he dies, he is in a state of isolation and separation from God and the people. He suffers from leprosy and has been judged for his pride and arrogance (2 Chron 26:16-21).

In this sense, King Uzziah’s death is symbolic of the problems and plight of the nation. Yet God is not silent; in this moment of death, God gives to Isaiah a powerful revelation and words to speak – words full of promise, new life, and grace. In the following sections of Isaiah, we see the triumph of grace and the promise of redemption which is embedded in judgement.

In verse 3 the focus is on holiness and the threefold repetition of the call is to emphasize God’s infinite holiness. Also, as we focus today on the Trinity, this call may well give us an insight into God’s unity within tri-unity. In the one Divine Being, there are three ‘persons’ or individual subsistences: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The same in substance or essence, but distinct in subsistence or existence. Maybe the quote from St Bernard of Clairvaux is worth reflecting on at this point: “*How can plurality consist with unity, or unity with plurality? To examine the fact closely is rashness, to believe it is true piety, to know it is life, and life eternal.*” I recommend the following books as helpful resources for preachers exploring key aspects of the Trinity:

- *Walking an Ancient Path*, Alex Jacob (Glory to Glory Publications, 2016);
- *The Jewish Trinity*, Yoel Natan (Aventine Press, 2003);
- *The Trinity: An Essential for Faith in Our Time*, Andrew Stirling (Evangel Publishing House, 2002).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Trinity Sunday – Year C

In verse 7, the live coal touching Isaiah's mouth and lips (and taking away his guilt) has parallels with the call of Jeremiah (see Jer 1:9). This emphasizes that all true prophets need to be cleansed, reconciled with, and empowered by the LORD. In this act of cleansing and empowering we have a glimpse of substitutionary sacrifice which holds together insights of atonement, satisfaction, and propitiation.

Psalm 29. The traditional Hebrew title for the Psalms is *Tehillim* (praises) but many of the Psalms are *tephillot* (prayers). The Psalms help us to both speak to God in prayer and speak (or sing) of God in praise. This psalm (a Psalm of David) is a vibrant example of a song of praise.

The opening verse is a summons to all beings in the heavenly realm (this links back to Isaiah's vision) to worship the LORD. These words echoes the liturgy of the temple (see 1 Chron 16). The praise flows from the understanding that the LORD is the King of creation, whose power, beauty, and majesty are proclaimed by the storms and through the thunderbolts. The psalm concludes with the affirmation of God's sovereign rule and the proclamation to bring peace and blessing to his people.

Revelation 4:1-11. John, in the power and presence of the Spirit (v. 2), is invited into the throne room of heaven. This has parallels with Isaiah's call and with Moses who is called up to Mount Sinai (Exod 19) to receive the commandments.

John begins to try and describe that which is beyond words; he writes of the utter awesomeness of what he sees and hears in terms of the reflected brilliance of precious stones, lightning and thunder. The four living creatures John describes are very similar to those in the vision given to Ezekiel 1. The four living creatures (v. 8) continually offer up their songs of praise, which connects back to Isaiah 6. The focus on the past (who was), present (and is), and future (is to come) repeat the opening greeting given in Revelation 1:4.

This focus reminds me of the acclamation of praise which is offered in most Holy Communion celebrations when we declare, "*Messiah has died, Messiah is risen, Messiah will come again*". This acclamation unites Christians across traditions, times, and cultures; it reminds us that we are rooted in time. Our faith firstly looks back to the redemptive acts of Jesus. Secondly, our faith is rooted in the present, namely in the reality and presence of the risen LORD and the outworking of daily discipleship shaped by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, our faith is rooted in the future, namely the Second Coming of Jesus and the full consummation of God's Kingdom promises. The final emphasis on the future (is to come) may well be an expansion of the Divine Name as revealed to Moses at the start of the Exodus (Exod 3:14-15). For a further study into the Divine Name, I recommend the book by R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011).

The reading from Revelation concludes with the celebration and acknowledgement that God alone is worthy of worship. The focus here on creation leads us back to the very beginning (Gen 1).

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Trinity Sunday – Year C

John 16:5-15. Our Gospel reading for Trinity Sunday is this intimate section of teaching by Jesus about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus knows that he probably has less than 24 hours before his crucifixion. In this context of concern, fear (John 14:27) and grief (16:6), Jesus talks directly about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will do many things: he will convict (or will expose the guilt of the world) the world of guilt (v. 8); he will guide the disciples in the ways of truth (v. 12); he will tell about what is yet to come (v. 13) and he will glorify Jesus.

In verse 15 once again we see the close and ‘interrelated’ relationship of the Father, Spirit, and Jesus. The final verse (v. 16) tells of a time (a little while) when the disciples will see Jesus again. Some suggest this refers to the Second Coming, but on balance, I see this fitting more the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

As we reflect on this, let us pray that we will all have a renewed vision of the majesty of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May we also have a growing openness to yield our lives to the work of the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit is not a gift from God to make up for the absence of Jesus, but rather the Holy Spirit is a gift of God who confirms the presence of the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus in his people today.

ACNA Readings

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31. The personification of heavenly things has its place in the genre of Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature is not unique to Judaism and shares the common near eastern characteristic whereby sages teach divine attributes and quality through personifications. Solomon personifies heavenly wisdom as a noble, beautiful, and helpful woman. The writer of the apocryphal book of Baruch does the same thing in Baruch chapter 3 where wisdom becomes synonymous with the Torah who then takes on the form of humanity and dwells with humanity (Baruch 3:37-38)¹. Solomon declares that wisdom is not hidden, as she cries out in public and in the streets. Wisdom is something that should be heard. This is in contrast to the Greek tradition in which wisdom is reserved for the academics and religious elites. Hebraic wisdom is available to all people. Wisdom guides and informs every aspect of society and not just academia. This universal aspect is concurrent in the proclamations of the prophet Joel that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh.

Proverbs 8:22 was used by Arius of Alexandria to promote heretical teachings. Arius argued that Jesus was the wisdom of God and was thus a created being. We should remind ourselves that in the

¹ This is possibly the source for the opening verses of John 1 in which the Word becomes flesh and dwells amongst us. Baruch 3 shows that the theology of the Gospel of John is steeped in Jewish sources and is not a Greek invention. In contrast Greek gnostics promoted the idea that flesh was evil thus good gods would never take the form of human flesh. In Hebrew thought all of Creation was declared good by God and God could take human form to interact with his creation.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Trinity Sunday – Year C

motif of personification, Jesus – as part of the Godhead – is also consulting wisdom, not the Father consulting the Son as wisdom.

Psalm 8. The opening chapters of Genesis provide the backdrop to this hymn of praise where mankind is presented as the pinnacle of the creation week. David invokes the personal name of God, יהוה, in the first verse, proclaiming the ‘name’ to be majestic and glorious in all heaven and earth. How is God’s name majestic? David suggests that the glory of God’s name is seen in the dignity and status he gives to humans in his creation order. The universe that the Lord fashioned is vast and largely unfathomable to us. With our naked eyes we can perceive only about 5,000 of the over one billion stars. Compared to the enormity of the universe, Homo sapiens are somewhat insignificant. ‘What is man that you are mindful of him’, David asks? In verse, 5 David writes that man was made ‘lower than the angels’; although the word for angel in this verse is actually אֱלֹהִים *elohim* which is the word for *God* or *gods*! God has dominion over all things that he made, and yet he shares that dominion with mankind. David here probably has in mind the mandate to ‘subdue the earth’ given to Adam in Genesis. This sharing of dominion is truly a wonder and an aspect of God’s grace. At Pentecost, he shares his Holy Spirit. Part of God’s grace is in not retaining the Spirit in Heaven, but sharing his power on earth. With the Holy Spirit, we go on to expand the Kingdom of Heaven, bringing the good news of hope and light to our fallen world. In so, doing we continue to magnify the glory of God.

Romans 5:1-5. The assurance of forgiveness is a powerful part of traditional liturgies. Many people come to worship because they believe in God and in Jesus as the Messiah, and yet they still remain unsure of their salvation. One of my greatest pleasures during worship is when we get to announce the assurance of forgiveness following confession to publicly declare and remind people of the finished work of the cross. Paul here reminds us clearly of the hope we have as a result of the righteousness we have received from God through the work of Jesus Christ. We are justified by faith and now have peace with God. This peace is communicated to believers through the Holy Spirit. That does not mean that the faithful are without troubles and tribulations. Far from it! Paul knew many misfortunes and trials in his own life. Therefore from experience, Paul can declare that suffering through those times of trials does not destroy the work of faith in our lives. Instead it is the foundation in a chain of maturity that results in renewed hope in God.

John 16:12-15. The Trinity is probably one of the most difficult theological concepts to grasp on a personal intellectual level and nigh impossible to adequately verbally describe to others. Jesus admits here that his teaching is somewhat incomplete, as there are ‘many things’ he still has to say to his disciples. It is the Holy Spirit that will continue the instruction to us. The word *disciple* in Hebrew means *student*, and so on one level we are going to be continually in the process of learning and understanding new things from God. It is the way Jesus describes the work of the Spirit and his relationship to the Father that we see a glimpse of the Godhead. The Spirit will declare things that are to come, and this suggests foreknowledge of the future. As part of the Godhead, the Spirit has access to things of the future and provides some evidence for his divine nature.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Trinity Sunday – Year C

About the RCL author. The Rev. Alex Jacob is a United Reformed Church minister ordained in 1985. He led three church congregations in the UK before beginning ministry with CMJ in 2006. He is the CEO of CMJ UK and has pioneered key evangelism and advocacy work. He has written a range of theological and devotional books; the most recent is a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. Alex holds a master of arts degree in pastoral theology and a master of philosophy research degree. His research interests focus on knowing Jesus in his Jewish context and the theology of election with reference to Romans 9-11. Alex has ministered in many contexts and has travelled widely. He is married to Mandy, and they have three adult children: Luke, Emily, and Ben.

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