

Swiss Church in London

Sunday, 18 May 2008

Jeremiah 31,1-10

Matthew 28, 16-20

Dear friends

This is my last sermon as Minister of the Swiss Church in London.

It makes it special to me.

I have now been here with you for four and a half years.

Time to look back at my achievements and give you an overview of all the things that I have tried to do.

Now, I hope that you know me well enough to think: is he now really going to talk about himself and his achievements from the pulpit? No, he isn't.

The pulpit is reserved for preaching God's word, to share the good news of his son's gospel with you and to tell you of his love.

This is why the pulpit is high up, higher up than anything else in the Church Hall.

The position of the pulpit emphasises the importance of the word in our Protestant tradition.

The preacher is an instrument and serves God to the best of his abilities by conveying God's word.

Of course the preacher cannot be separated from his words and there is much of me in my sermons.

However, I am not preaching myself, but Jesus the crucified.

I am not the centre of my message, but I am also preaching to myself.

All this should be done to the glory of God.

Having said that, today's sermon will be much "business as usual", nothing grand or extraordinary.

Dear friends, today is Trinity Sunday, the day when Christians ponder upon the mystery of the Trinity.

This is a day that has been celebrated in the Christian church since the 10th century.

In today's reading we heard the words of Jesus, spoken to his disciples:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three and yet one. One of the greatest mysteries of humankind.

Let me begin by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity does not attempt to explain God.

It only explains to us in a very elemental way what God has revealed to us about himself so far.

To describe the tip of the iceberg above the water is not to describe the entire iceberg.

So we Christians affirm the Trinity, not as an explanation of God, but simply as a way of describing what we know about Him.

First, we affirm *God the Father*.

The issue is not whether or not there is a God.

An overwhelming majority of Britons believe in the existence of a God in some form or another.

People like Richard Dawkins or John Humphrys, two well known outspoken atheists and authors of books like *The God Delusion* or *In God We Doubt*, are still a minority.

The real question is not so much if there is a God, but *what kind of a God?*

According to philosophers like John Locke or Thomas Hobbes, for example, God was like a big cosmic watchmaker.

He created the universe and wound it up and let it go.

The world is now in the process of simply letting itself run down.

God has completely detached himself from his creation.

Others, like the philosopher Nietzsche, say that there indeed, once was a God, but that he is now dead. They say that the God of the universe has so completely poured himself into the person of Jesus Christ that when Jesus died on the cross God himself died.

These views are foreign to the Christian way of thinking.

We affirm that the same God who moulded the universe also cares about what happens in our life.

Indeed, he is actively and mysteriously involved in helping to shape the events of your life.

The fact that we refer to the first person of the Trinity as Father, or also as mother I hasten to add, says something about what God is like.

In fact, Jesus went so far as to refer to God not only as Father but as *Abba*, which is the Hebrew word meaning Daddy.

Can you imagine referring to the creator of an endless universe, the creator of countless solar systems as Daddy?

If we could only think of God as that loving father and mother who waits patiently for us while we foolishly wander off to the far countries in our life and do our own thing.

Then, when we have come to ourselves, he is there to meet us at the door and joyfully take us back in.

It is easy to think of God as the omnipotent, holy other, righteous, all-powerful, judge.

These are all traits of the divine and we must indeed learn to think of him in these terms.

But if our Christian understanding of the nature of God is to be correct, then we must also learn to think of God as our kind, sympathetic, understanding, compassionate, gentle and loving father and mother.

To be sure there are stern images of God in the Old and New Testaments, even in the Gospels themselves.

But the love of God is the major emphasis, which runs throughout the Bible. There is no message which breaks down the resistance of recalcitrant hearts like the message of persistent love.

A love bestowed in spite of what we have done; a love given that was not earned;
a love that came despite our resistance;
a love that healed when sickness pervaded our soul;
a love that to this day restores, restores, and restores.

The prophet Jeremiah caught the true message of our religion when he heard God say to him, "I have loved you with an everlasting love."

Secondly, we affirm a belief in the Son, Jesus Christ.

We say that God took on human form, came and lived among us, suffered the same trials that we suffered, experienced the same feelings that we experienced.

Jesus was purely human and purely divine. Jesus was not God.

Jesus was God, incarnate.

There is a difference.

Jesus never drew attention to himself but always pointed to God.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian of another century tells a story of a prince who wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand?

He could order her to marry him.

But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion.

He could put on his most splendid uniform and drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six horses.

But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of the splendour.

The prince came up with another solution.

He would give up his robes, move into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant.

He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language.

In time the maiden grew to love him for who he was and loved him because he had first loved her.

This very simple, almost child like story, written by one of the most brilliant minds of our time explains what we Christians mean by the incarnation.

God came and lived, among us.

I am glad that this happened for two reasons:

One, it shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is with us, that he is on our side, and that he loves us.

Secondly, it gives us a first hand view of what the mind of God is really all about.

When people ask what God is like, we as Christians point to the person of Jesus Christ.

God himself is incomprehensible.

But in Jesus Christ this incomprehensible God makes himself knowable.

We get a glimpse of his glory.

In the person of Jesus we are told that mysterious Other who created the stars and the universe is willing to go all of the way, even to a cross, so that a single person may be redeemed.

That is what God is like.

That is the God we say we believe in when we say we believe in Jesus Christ.

Finally, we affirm a belief in the Holy Spirit.

What is the Holy Spirit?

In the Korean Creed we read, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort and for strength,” The Modern Affirmation words it:

“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ and find strength and help in time of need.”

Put it another way. The Holy Spirit is the *infinite become intimate*. It is the Beyond that is within. It is the *realization of the presence of the Living God*.

Intimacy with God. That’s what the Holy Spirit brings to our lives.

And herein lies a danger.

We must be careful lest we identify the work of the Holy Spirit with our own deep feelings and impulses.

Virtually every conceivable error of judgment or breakdown in intelligence within the church can, and has been, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whether it is the capital punishment of heretics as was done in the middle ages or the moving of paedophile priest from church to church today, the church has sanctioned some horrible behaviour under the guise of “It seems good to us and to the Holy Spirit.”

I would like to close with this thought on the Trinity.

It perhaps might help us to understand this doctrine better if we word it this way: *God the Father who is for us, God the Son who is with us, and God the Holy Spirit who is within us*.

Someone once asked Mrs. Albert Einstein if she understood her husband’s theory of relativity.

No, she said, but I know my husband.

We cannot begin to fathom the incomprehensible mysteries of God, but that does not mean that we cannot know God.

If God, choosing to make himself known to us, comes in the person of Jesus Christ and says I am your brother, and let me show you the Father, then by the Holy Spirit you can know God. Intimately. Personally. Amen

David Leuenberger