

Sermon

Sunday 7 June 2020
Trinity Sunday

Lesson

St Matthew 28: 16 - 20



In Christian iconography, each of the four Gospels is associated with a different symbol. John is an eagle; Luke is a winged ox or bull; Mark is a winged lion; and Matthew is a winged man or angel. It is in the Gospel of Matthew that we find the ‘Great Commission’. In its closing verses the Risen Christ instructs His

followers to travel to all nations, all corners of the earth, to make new disciples and to baptise in ‘the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’. The doctrine of the Trinity, the *Triune* God, the *Three-in-One*, is the Christian belief that there is one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Had we been in church this morning, our diets of worship would have opened with the memorable and poetic hymn of the Shropshire vicar Reginald Heber, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. Regarded by the Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as the finest hymn in the English language, Heber penned these words for Trinity Sunday:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty!
early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;

holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
 God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Had we been in church, we would have marked the feast day of St Columba (June 9) in our worship and shared in a splendid lunch in the hall afterwards. In our purple hymnbook, there are two hymns written by Columba, both of which rise and close in praise of the Trinity:

Thou to the meek and lowly
 thy secrets dost unfold;
 O God, thou doest all things,
 all things both new and old.
 I walk secure and blessèd
 in every clime and coast,
 in name of God the Father,
 and Son, and Holy Ghost.

*Hymn: O God, thou art the Father
 (Tune: Aurelia)*

Glory to God the Father,
 the unbegotten One;
 all honour be to Jesus,
 his sole-begotten Son;
 and to the Holy Spirit –
 the perfect Trinity.
 Let all the worlds give answer,
 ‘Amen, so let it be’.

*Hymn: Christ is the world’s Redeemer
 (Tune: Aurelia)*

Each Wednesday, I offer a short reflection which can be accessed on our church website and Facebook. This coming week I shall reflect briefly on the life of Columba, the *dove*. Today let me draw on the

insight and poetry of another Celtic saint, Patrick. Based on the Gaelic poem *St Patrick's Lorica* (or 'Breastplate'), we are blessed with the great hymn, *I bind unto myself today*. A lorica was a spiritual coat or breastplate which one 'wore' for strength, assurance and healing. To the tune *St Patrick* we sing:

I bind unto myself today
the strong Name of the Trinity;
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.

The fifth of six verses (CH4) is sung to a different tune, *Gartan*, which means worshippers must be alert:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

The English anchorite, Julian of Norwich, saw the deep, infinite love of God intrinsically rooted in the purposes of the Trinity.

I saw that God never began to love humanity. For just as humanity is destined to come to endless joy, and so crown God's delight in God's work, so humanity in God's thought has always been known and loved. From God we come, in God we are enfolded, to God we return. We shall find in God our whole heaven in everlasting joy – and this by foreseeing purposes in the blessed Trinity since before time was.

Julian is particularly good at qualifying the masculine emphasis in so much of our language concerning God. She said, ‘As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother’. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the Word or Wisdom (*Sophia*) of God. Julian wrote of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as, ‘The high might of the Trinity is our Father, the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord’. Elsewhere, she referred to Jesus as ‘our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born’. In expansive terms, Julian felt the lorica of St Patrick: we are enfolded in God, held eternally in God’s loving embrace.

From our first breath to our last, from this life to all that lies beyond, our journey is *in* God. We are to close our eyes and trust in love. Let the greenness of leaves at the roadside and on the motorway corridor be a sure sign of God’s enfolding Presence; let daily cloud cover, its heaviness and shadings of grey be a sure sign of God’s hidden Presence; and, let each rainfall be a fresh – refreshing – baptism, a sure sign of God’s promised unconditional love.

All language about God is symbolic. In the creeds, when we recite the lines that Jesus ‘ascended into heaven’ or ‘is seated at the right hand of the Father’, we do not mean that heaven is in the sky, that God has hands, or that God is male. God is ‘Father/Mother’ who creates and recreates the heavens, the stars above us, the cosmos in all its complexity; God is ‘Son’ seen in the face of Jesus of Nazareth,

heard in His voice; and God is ‘Holy Spirit’, the Spirit of Truth, dwelling in our hearts, poured into our hearts. Correctly understood, the Three Persons of the Trinity are not persons but *personae*: they are aspects or masks of the Eternal.

Rather than fret over the finer points of Christian doctrine or grow anxious about what we are supposed to ‘believe’, we can instead ‘belove’ God. Drawing on the ancient creeds, we may say:

I belove God, I give my heart to God, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen, who is known decisively in Jesus; and I belove the Holy Spirit, the giver of life.

Instead of doctrinal dispute and disagreement, better surely that followers of Jesus are known as lovers of the Mystery.

Following in the footsteps of Columba and Patrick, Celtic Christians used *Caims* to retune themselves to the reality of God’s Presence and love. We too regularly need to tune into the Presence. Spoken inwardly, slowly and gently, *caims* are very simple:

Your Presence is in my life
Your Presence is all around me.
Your Presence is Peace.

Your Presence is in my home
Your Presence is all around me.
Your Presence is Peace.

Your Presence is in my work
Your Presence is all around me.
Your Presence is Peace.

A threefold *caim* pattern is suggestive of the *Threeness*. We may say, Your Presence is *Peace*, Your Presence is *Love*, or Your Presence is *Strength*. For Celtic Christians, the Trinity was not an arcane, irrelevant doctrine: it helped them experience the Presence in their daily lives. Let the meditation of St Patrick mould and shape your soul:

I bind unto myself today
the strong Name of the Trinity;
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.

Amen.