
the God who connects all things
a sermon for Trinity Sunday

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A sermon that emerges partly from the experience of participating in the Oxford Inter-Faith walk the previous Thursday, in which members of the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities walked together in witness to God's peace, from the Synagogue, via St Mary's Church on the High Street, to the Central Mosque.

In order to understand the genius of Christian Faith we need to grasp three dimensions of Reality :

1. Transcendence : God the Father

'Otherness'. Human beings are not the centre of the universe. Nor can we stand 'outside' the universe. The idea that we can view the universe objectively is a modern myth, albeit a powerful myth. The universe is a mystery and we are a part of that mystery.

It's not about superstitious belief in some *other* reality. The atheist/theist argument is a dead end. It's about whether we can ever really be objective about *this* reality as a whole.

"My thoughts are higher than your thoughts, my ways than your ways" (Isaiah 55)

"For all our learning, we don't know very much" (1Corinthians 13)

It's not about superstition, but it is about recognising that there is more to this universe than we can see or know, and that there always will be. It's about recognising that we can only see the universe through human senses, and in human dimensions. That we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made', certainly, but there is a big question as to whether human beings can ever really know anything fully. We can by all means study and research especially if it can help us overcome suffering. To talk of 'mystery' is not a 'cop-out' or excuse for not being bothered to unpack the mysteries of

the Universe. But we don't even know what human consciousness is yet!

To suggest that God is not real is as sensible as arguing that a square can be round. God is the name we give to whatever is really real, undisputably, unmistakably real; it's what the word God means; and in the Abrahamic faith tradition we Christians, Muslims and Jews say "The Lord your God is One." In other words, there is ultimately only one Universe (however many dimensions it has); there is ultimately only one Mystery in which all the lesser mysteries meet. In other words we believe that somewhere, somehow, it all hangs together, past, present and future.

2. Perception, Recognition : God the Holy Spirit

And yet as we interact with the world and other people we are surrounded by *difference*; all around us there are tears and contradictions in our reality, tensions between different groups of people, animals killing and eating each other up and down the food chain. It sometimes seems that everything is fragmented, broken apart into a million different pieces.

In the midst of this chaos and confusion we are led to come to conclusions about the significance of things – that is, what they mean to us. We do it all the time : "This person is more significant to me than that person." "What she said 'rang bells'." Boy makes eye contact across a crowded room with a girl, and something clicks in each of them as if to say "This is not just another person. There is something about this person that is significant for you." There's a kind of little electric current that flows between the two, connecting them.

This kind of thing happens all the time. It happens throughout the Creation; it happens throughout the animal kingdom, yes, but it's found in the attraction of electrons that come together to form molecules, and the attraction that keeps earth in orbit round the sun. That attraction has been measured, and we have called it gravity. It acts in the gap between two bodies, yet also sort of within them, because of them.

That is the Holy Spirit in action. She works at the personal level, filling in the gaps between people, making connections, revealing deeper truths between people and between things, drawing, teasing all things closer to their purpose in God's all-encompassing scheme of things. That's what we mean when we say the Holy Spirit is a 'person' of the Trinity – we mean that she works at the personal level, within our personality.

Without the Holy Spirit, nothing would have any significance for us, everything would be meaningless; all things would fly apart; indeed, the Universe as we know it couldn't have been gathered together from the formless chaotic waste in the first place – that's what Genesis means when it says the Spirit was 'brooding on the waters'. The Holy Spirit is what drew the stardust together to weave a universe of meaning.

It is because of the Holy Spirit's action that some people acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as God's only-begotten Son. "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, Peter." People didn't work it out rationally – the penny dropped, the little electric current called. You can't really pray to the Holy Spirit : the Holy Spirit is why we pray in the first place, she it is that draws prayer out of us.

It's because of the Holy Spirit's action that a Muslim recognises the Qur'an as being the Holy Qur'an : the Muslims' holy book – a word, a message from the unknowable God. At

least, if it isn't the Holy Spirit's action that leads a Muslim to give it this significance, then either their faith is second-hand, not personal, or it's false, and they are deluded. Of course, there are some Christians who would be horrified at the suggestion that it is the Holy Spirit who leads some people to recognise the Qur'an as God-given, Christians who would say that "Of course it's not a message from God; of course they are deluded".

So how do we know that, when something, someone, some idea becomes enormously significant for us – whether it's the little charge of excitement as boy catches the eye of girl across the room, or the message of the Qur'an catches someone's imagination and turns them to God, or a Beethoven symphony moves us to tears – how do we know that this is the work of the Holy Spirit?

Well, for a start, there is no obvious answer. The wind blows where it wills. The Holy Spirit blows in and out of the windows of our religious institutions and their doctrines. The Holy Spirit makes friends of people who we think ought to be our enemies; reconciles things we think shouldn't ever be reconciled. "When the moment comes, you will just know" – this is what Jesus promised his followers. But there will be something unmistakable and totally personal about it. And there was.

3. The One who shows us God : God the Son

The best we can do, as Christians, is to start where we are, with what we are convinced the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to : namely, Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Spirit has led us to call 'Lord' and 'Saviour'. We didn't work it out, remember; it could never be proved; it came as a gift.

Jesus of Nazareth, not the Qur'an, is *for us* the defining truth. Jesus of Nazareth is the yardstick by which we measure the Holy Spirit's activity. If, as Jim and I did on Thursday, we encounter Muslims for whom the Qur'an is from God, I cannot enter into that experience (unless the Holy Spirit takes me there). I have to assess it from outside. The only tools I have to assess it with are my own experiences of my walk with Christ.

If I can sense that the challenge those Muslims feel is something like the challenge that Christ gives me, then I have grounds for believing that maybe the Holy Spirit has been at work in those Muslims' own experience. If they (like me) have felt a sense of God's holiness and God's otherness, a sense that (faced with this holiness) they need to make a personal faith decision, if they feel (as I do) that the call is to submit themselves to the mercy of God and give their lives in the service of love, forgiving others – well then, I'm inclined to think that, yes, maybe for them, God's Spirit has indeed made the Qur'an holy.

And if (as indeed I did on Thursday evening) I get a powerful sense of the significance of our Inter-Faith Walk, a sense that these people, for all the strangeness, are somehow on the same wavelength, then who's to say that the Holy Spirit was not also present in that gathering, calling us together and calling us to give our lives in service of our city?

Trinity Sunday is the best Sunday of the year; the one I most look forward to preaching. The Trinity does not have to be some terribly theoretical, complicated bit of theology : 'three persons, consubstantial, coeternal' – all that sort of thing – but simply a celebration of this :

- God is great; greater than any human conception, unknowable in perfection

- But God reveals God's own truth, by Holy Spirit, God opens eyes and hearts, reaches into our souls, reconnects us, breaks our pride and remakes us.
- God gives us to know that all that we humans need to know about God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the final judge, the final measure of truth, by whom we can recognise the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

And this is the 'good news' about God that Jesus bears witness to : that God's perfection is the perfection of truthful love; that through the power of the Holy Spirit at work between us and the world we are able to respond to that which is of God in the world, we are enabled to see things not as our self-centred nature might prefer to see them, but as they really are in God, because we are enabled to see them with love.

Dick Wolff