



Sermon preached in Chapel Trinity Sunday (June 16th) 2019

Isaiah 6: 1-8; 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20

People don't always get sermons. A man came home from church and his wife asked, "What did he preach about?" "I think it was about Sin". "What did he say?" "I think he was against it".

The message of this sermon is clear and simple. So if I tell it to you now, at the beginning, you can spend the next ten minutes or so doing whatever you want. You can look around the Chapel. You can contemplate the prospect of a no-deal BREXIT. Whatever takes your fancy. The message is this: the Trinity is not a doctrine but an understanding of God which challenges most of what we mean by religion. Once again, before you drift off: the Trinity is not a doctrine but an understanding of God which challenges most of what we mean by religion.

People used to say that religion has had its day. That's not true, especially outside Western Europe. People used to say that conservative, fundamentalist religion could never survive in our enlightened, rational world. They've been proved even more wrong. Religion and Fundamentalism are very much alive, and in many places they are fuelling bitterness and even violence.

Talk of fundamentalism usually takes us straight to Islam, and the fact that 9:11 showed that "the end of history", the victory of secular, liberal democracy had been wildly over-exaggerated. So we've had ISIS, and the outrages on London Bridge, in Paris, Manchester, and at Easter in Sri Lanka. But it's not only Islam. In India, since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, Hindu nationalism has further divided the country, resulting in mob violence against non-Hindus.

And before we Christians get too self-congratulatory, remember that white supremacy is rising in the United States, claiming that it's fighting for Christian values, as did the white power terrorists in Quebec and Christchurch, New Zealand. And here in Europe Christine Le Penn says that her kind of populism is in defence of "Christian civilization".

I would like to talk about another religion, and the violence being done to the Palestinian people in the name of Zionism, but you can't do that these days without being called anti-Semitic, so I won't risk that today.

Religion in general, and especially when it becomes what we call "fundamentalist", can so often lead to division, exclusion, and to violence. So what's the alternative? The easy secularist answer is "get rid of religion once and for all". But that only tries to

avoid an important fact, that secularism is just as likely have the same effect. Historically, even more so. When people have a go at us for the Crusades and Colonialism I always like to remind them that in the last century the great secularist religions – for that is what they were – National Socialism and Marxist Leninism – killed far more people than any theistic faith. Not to mention those wiped out by the atheist regimes of China under Chairman Mao and Cambodia under Pol Pot.

Secularism is just another ideology, as potentially threatening as any other to human wellbeing and flourishing, and as capable as any other religion of bringing conflict and violence. One of the most invidious and inveigling aspects of British public life, and in the media, is the claim that secularism is assumed to be somehow neutral and normative, while religion is at best an emotional add-on and at worst a cause of division. It is not so.

So what is the alternative? I suggest it is what we are celebrating today. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity proclaims an understanding of God which challenges and often contradicts most of religion, and leads in the opposite direction from violence.

Much religion, including lot of Christian religion, sees God as demanding and uncompromising, willing to unbend a little if begged to do so, but in the end hard and unyielding. God is about power, certainty, victory. The Trinity says, No, God is not like that. God is... now at this point I need to insert a disclaimer or health warning, because **it's impossible to talk about the Trinity without committing heresy. But heresy probably worries the Church more than it does God, so let's press on anyway.**

The Trinity says you can see God in many ways, but primarily and most clearly in three: as Creator and Father, as (in Jesus) Friend and Brother, and (in the Holy Spirit) Comforter and Caller. But these three persons are so bound up together that when you look again there is only one.

And, even more, this love that binds them together is so strong, so dynamic, so self-giving, that it cannot but keep overflowing into our world. It happens in Creation, at the beginning, and ever since. It happens in the Incarnation, in Jesus Christ and his ultimate sacrifice of himself for our sake. And it happens every day as the Spirit draws us, even us, into this community of love which is God.

The Trinity says that God is dynamic, coming and going, sending and responding, enfolding and letting go, reaching out and self-giving. **And, I'll use the word again, overflowing – unable to stop himself from overflowing – into our world. And that for me defines the word "Mission" not marketing and recruitment, but becoming part of what God is doing in his / her/ their world.**

The Trinity is not a doctrine but an understanding of God which challenges most of what we mean by religion. Its fruit is not division and violence, but finding ourselves and everyone else caught up **in the flows of God's love.**

There's no great harm in being religious, especially if the kind of religious if the religion you espouse rejects the worst extreme of fundamentalism. There's no harm in being religious if it means that we appreciate beauty, in art and music. No great harm if, in the midst of the stresses and strains of life, at home or at work, you need some space to

escape and regroup your energies. And if our worship together meets something of that need, well, we may be on the way.

But the deeper question is how all of this can lead us nearer to the God whom we see in the Holy Trinity. To the wonder that Isaiah experienced in the Temple, and his response "Here am I, send me". To an understanding of God which rejects where religion, secular and divine, can so often lead. To the God whose arms of love are never closed. To the kind of world which may reflect that love today.