

# Children of the Triune God

*A sermon on Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17 & John 3:1-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 May 2021*

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## Message

The recognition that in Jesus we see the exact likeness of the Father rescues us from fear and slavery and invites us to live as the beloved children of God.

## Sermon

A funny thing happened in the chat time after Vespers last Thursday: people started talking about the doctrine of the Trinity! I can't actually remember what triggered it, but I'm fairly sure it wasn't me. We pastors are not used to anyone actually wanting to talk about the concept of God as trinity, because most of the time, even those of us trained in theology have trouble talking about it in a way that has any impact, even on people's thinking, let alone on the way they live their lives.

So tonight I want to pick up from that conversation on Thursday evening and delve into today's Bible readings to highlight at least one reason why recognising the unity of Father, Son and Spirit as just one God really is something that impacts on our lives and can begin to turn the world upside down.

And just in case you are feeling like dozing off already, just at the thought of it, let me tell you that this sermon will revisit and develop some of the ideas I spoke about in that sermon on Penal Substitutionary Atonement a few weeks ago that got a lot of you quite excited.

In our first reading tonight, and in the song we sang at the beginning of the service, we heard the story of the prophet Isaiah's vision of the Lord God Almighty surrounded by the cherubim and seraphim in the temple. It is quite a complex and beautiful story, and I like it a lot, but it has also been badly abused by power-hungry and oppressive religious leaders.

You see, images of a big, all-powerful, terrifying God are useful to religious power mongers as tools to keep the people under their thumb. When Isaiah sees this vision of God, he falls down and thinks he is going to die. He is suddenly painfully aware of the ways he has failed God, and he is sure that his sins have now caught up with him. The story tells us that one of the seraphim took a burning coal from the fire on the altar and touched it to Isaiah's mouth to blot out his sins. Now, even as an image of forgiveness, having burning coals from a fire pressed to your mouth is a pretty terrifying prospect. Some people might think that staying unforgiven was preferable, and who could blame them?

These images are further reinforced by the psalm that we sang tonight which spoke of lightning and thunder, and earthquakes and cyclones, and powerful storms at sea, and sees them all as signs of the hand of God at work. This is a scary God, and when the world we live in is ruled by such a scary God, people want to know how to keep this God happy and onside.

Such anxieties are magnified hugely in times like these, because plagues and pandemics have so often been similarly seen as acts of God.

This is where the oppressive power-mongers move in, some of them even claiming to know what God is trying to tell us by sending a plague on us. If people can be kept frightened of a

big scary God, and almost as frightened of the process of being cleansed and forgiven by God, then they will be easy prey for powerful church leaders who can portray themselves as standing in between us and that scary God and having in their hands the power to protect us from God's anger and to dispense God's forgiveness and blessings to us in safe ways.

Whether it is big mainstream hierarchical churches, whose pronouncements cannot be questioned, or tele-evangelists promising healing and prosperity and asking for your money, you'll find the same idea that the only safe and reliable way into God's good books is through them. They won't quite say that. They will probably say that it is through faith in Jesus, but they will also make it clear that you have to get that faith right – you have to believe the right things in the right ways – and so you are still dependent on them as God's anointed interpreters and teachers who can ensure that you are on the right track.

Things like penal views of the atonement readily become part of this, because they reinforce the idea that God is a punishing God, and that being spared from that punishment is the most important goal of our spiritual lives. Scary God; avoiding punishment; and powerful priests with an exclusive hold on the keys to keeping us safe – there's a dangerous trinity of ideas!

Now, believe it or not, one of the reasons why the doctrine of the Trinity is important is because it is a central part of overcoming the power of this abusive and oppressive set of ideas.

You see, when God is portrayed as angry and scary and punishing, as someone with both the power and the desire to punish us all in hell for eternity if he is not first paid off by some suitable blood sacrifice, then thinking of Jesus as the one who comes to pay off God with the offering of his own blood actually puts Jesus in tension with God, or even in opposition to God. God has one agenda, and Jesus becomes the one who sets out to circumvent that agenda on our behalf. Jesus is seeking to save us from God. We have God and Jesus working against each other.

Again, this suits the power-mongers, because they can set themselves up as the representatives of Jesus who, if we do as we are told and believe what we are told to believe, will act on our behalf to ensure that we are included in those who Jesus rescues from the eternal punishments threatened by that angry God.

When we begin to grasp the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity – the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one – this abusive and oppressive structure comes tumbling down. You see, there is nothing especially controversial about saying that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three. It is saying that they are one that changes the world and sets us free. As long as they are three, and only three, of course they can be working against each other. Of course they can have contrary agendas, and one can be working to save us from one of the others.

But if God is one, that is a very different matter. Jesus said, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. The Father and I are one." And if that is true, this idea that one of them has to try to get the other to change track in order to save us becomes an absolute nonsense. "The Father and I are one." There are no contrary agendas. There are no crossed purposes.

The doctrine of the Trinity, most importantly, doesn't resolve this dilemma by making out that Jesus is actually one with the angry punishing God, although of course there have been plenty of attempts to do that. The power mongers are not going to give up their very useful angry God so easily, so there have been plenty of heretical attempts to portray Jesus as a sword wielding violent conqueror who will come riding on the clouds and cast those who are lost into the lake of fire.

But Jesus did not say, "When you have seen me coming as the conquering judge who deals out God's vengeance, then you will have seen the Father." He says, "If you have seen me, me who has been teaching you to love your enemies, me who is about to be tortured to death on a cross without raising a hand to harm those who harm me; if you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

So when we are wanting to understand the nature of this one God, we don't start with the intimidating image of Isaiah's vision, and we don't start with the thundering cyclone God of Psalm 29, or the God of plagues and pestilence. The idea of the Trinity doesn't ask us to try to get Jesus and the Holy Spirit to conform to those pictures. Instead, it says that we begin every single time with Jesus. Whatever we want to know about God, we begin with Jesus, because Jesus is the one we have seen living and working among us. Jesus is our definitive revelation of who God is and what God is like.

We heard some of the implications of that being spelt out in our other readings tonight. In his letter to the Romans, we heard the Apostle Paul telling us how we are broken free from the power of the oppressive power mongers who want to keep us scared. "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear," says Paul, "but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father! Mother!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Get that? Not only is God not one who wants to keep us enslaved with the power of fear, God is one who wants to free us to relate joyously and openly like little children with a beloved doting parent.

Jesus makes a similar point in his conversation with Nicodemus that we heard in the gospel reading, but Jesus goes even further than Paul's description of us being adopted as God's children. Jesus described us as being reborn, born from above, as God's children. Which suggests that when Jesus looks upon us as his brothers and sisters, he doesn't even do so with the qualification that we are adopted brothers and sisters while he is God's natural born offspring. Jesus describes us as being born of God too, and set free to live full of life and love and spirit, with nothing to fear from any big scary God or any self-appointed guardians of God's law and order.

So, in the end, instead of some weird dysfunctional trinity, riddled with internal conflicts over whether to destroy us or save us, we find that we have already been claimed by the one God as beloved children, and that life and love and hope are already ours. What the one God is seeking to save us from is not divine punishment, but our own failure to live into our identity as God's children, our own internal conflicts where turn on one another and tear one another apart, our own patterns of abuse and oppression and surrendering to oppression and fear.

Jesus's unwavering commitment to that message and that mission costs him his life. When the power mongers offer him the world if only he will become one of them and do things their way and bend the knee to their kind of power, Jesus says the only one to worship is the one and only God, one God, earth-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver, and for that uncompromising defence of our freedom, the demonic power-mongers rose up and killed him. But death is no match for the life of God. Jesus rises to fullness of life, and calls us again as his sisters and brothers to follow him into that same fullness of life.

So the question before all of us now is "Will you follow? Will you follow Jesus into the fullness of life and love that is your birthright as children of the one God, Trinity of Love?"