

When the Spirit of truth comes

A sermon on John 16:12-15; Proverbs 8:1-4; Romans 5:1-5 by Nathan Nettleton, 12 June 2022

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Message

We live in uncertain times, unsure of the future shape of the church, but Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to us, not to give us certainty, but to guide and sustain us in the uncertainty.

Sermon

We human beings, especially when we are young or insecure, are not very good at living with mystery. Most healthy people get better at it as they get older, and some even begin to welcome it and delight in it, but most of us never really get that comfortable with it. Especially when we are living in uncertain and unsettling times, we want as much clarity and certainty as possible, and we can be prone to avoiding or denying mystery, or even attacking those who make us aware of it.

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost in the church calendar, is called Trinity Sunday. It is somewhat unique in the calendar, because it is the only day that recalls and celebrates not an event, or a story of something that happened, but a doctrine or an idea or as they call it in some parts of the Church, a mystery.

I'm not going to give much attention to explaining or exploring the doctrine of the Trinity tonight. Instead I'm looking at it as an example of how we cope with mystery, and the sorts of things we do when we are not coping well with mystery.

It is an important doctrine though. It doesn't really matter whether you are any good at explaining the doctrine, but it does matter whether you are able to recognise and live its key implications. The main thing it teaches us is that the three quite different experiences we have of God – the three experiences we identify as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are all the one God. If they were three separate gods, like a scaled down version of the Greek pantheon of gods, then they could at times be completely at odds with one another, or in competition with one another. Each of them might behave quite differently towards us, or have different attitudes towards the things we do.

The doctrine of the Trinity warns us against such mistaken ideas and assures us that this is all the one God we are talking about, and any time our views of the three get out of step with one another and become too different, we are almost certainly getting aboard the wrong tram. This is all the one God and, as Jesus says, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father." So if you picture God the Father as a very different kind of character from Jesus, then you're getting it wrong. In tonight's gospel reading we heard Jesus saying that anything we hear from the Holy Spirit has come first from the Father and the Son. They are not singing from different pages or dancing to different tunes.

The doctrine of the Trinity gives the lie to some quite common ideas such as the one that says that God the Father is an vengeful perfectionist who angrily punishes failed humans for all eternity unless somebody is made to pay in blood, whereas Jesus is a much gentler, kinder, more merciful character who will do whatever it takes to appease the angry Father by letting him punish just one person really horribly in return for agreeing to forgive all the rest.

No, says the doctrine of the Trinity, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and that is equally true and unfailingly true whether we are encountering God as Father, Son or Holy Spirit. There isn't an angry one and a merciful one and a wild one all wrangling it out over us. They are all one God, all of one mind, and because Jesus is the one we have seen and experienced the most fully, it is our experience of Jesus that must govern how we understand and interpret the other two. Anything we think about any of them that is not consistent with what we know of Jesus is almost certainly wrong. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us so.

But of course, for much of its history, that is not what this doctrine has been known for. For much of its history, it has been better known as something over which Christians have fought, and divided up, and attacked one another. It has been known as a weapon of oppression used to trap and convict Jews and Muslims and pretty much anybody who didn't believe it or couldn't give the "right" answers about it. It has been used as the ultimate orthodoxy test, and in some eras if you failed the test, you were put to death. None of which sounds the least bit like Jesus.

What it does sound like is a people and an institution who were not coping at all with mystery or uncertainty. Even though the Church has often referred to the Trinity as a mystery, they have treated it as something that everyone had to have the right answer about, as something where no real mystery or ambiguity or uncertainty were to be tolerated. Uncertainty and difference of opinion were deemed too threatening, and so were to be ruthlessly crushed.

That sort of horrific oppressive response to mystery and uncertainty does not usually arise in isolation or relate only to the doctrine in question. It typically arises when we live in very uncertain times, and we are not coping well with the uncertainty of the times. Terrified of the uncertainty, we desperately want to get things clear and under control, and so we start trying to nail things down and eliminate the freedoms that feel full of chaos. So we demand certainty and insist on orthodoxy because it makes us feel a little safer and more in control in a dangerous world.

We can become rigid and uncompromising about all manner of things. "My view of sexuality is unquestioningly right, and anybody who disagrees can't be trusted and should be expelled." "My view of parenting is not to be questioned, and anybody who disagrees can't be trusted and shouldn't be allowed near children." "My view of the second amendment right to bear arms ..." We know where that ends up.

A few years ago, we were all bewildered and appalled by the mind-numbing barbarity of the so-called Islamic State group. How could anyone employ such brutality in seeking to enforce their version of religion on others? But we in the Church were forgetting our own sorry history. Perhaps Islam and the Christian Church are just a few hundred years out of sync with each another, but are fighting the same internal battles and making the same brutal blood-soaked mistakes.

Once again, we are living in a very uncertain world. Many of the stable pillars of our world that have seemed so certain for generations seem to be crumbling around us. A nation that prided itself on being the most Christian and most advanced democracy on earth is unable to stop its citizens shooting each other in ever increasing numbers, and unable to even agree on whether to condemn an armed insurrection that sought to overturn an election. Climate

change seems to have passed the point of no return, and we still can't agree on what to do about it. A global pandemic has upended life as we knew it, and major European nations are once again at war with one another.

For us in the Christian Church, so long a pillar of stability, everything seems to be crumbling too. Financial scandals. Sexual abuse scandals. And scandalous participation in the cruel scapegoating of vulnerable minority groups. Church as we have known it seems to have had its day. For more and more people, it is simply not working, and churches all over the place seem to be in terminal decline.

Of course, there are some churches that are growing numerically, but when we examine them more closely, we find that many of them are losing people even faster than the tired old mainstream churches; it's just that they employ high-tech marketing strategies to keep even more people coming in. They might be losing most of them in a revolving door, but as long as the marketing techniques bring in new ones faster than they lose them, they can maintain a strange kind of growth. The truth is that for more and more people, church at best is not working, and at worst is a big part of the problem.

We churches, fast losing any sense of relevance or influence in the world, are responding to this threatening uncertainty in either of two main ways. Some of us are reproducing the errors of the past when we used things like the doctrine of the Trinity to try to nail everything down and reassert control, and while we may not be nearly as brutal as ISIS in our quest for certainty, we still often manage to create an oppressive atmosphere of conformity in which no one feels free to question or dissent or tolerate unknowing.

Others have fled in the opposite direction, badging ourselves as "progressive" Christians, but for many of us, this appears to be less a joyous and powerfully transformative embrace of mystery than an embarrassed unwillingness to believe in anything very strongly other than the supreme importance of not offending anyone.

There are good and Jesus-like people in both of these camps, but neither camp seems to have any real answers and both are on the nose with most people outside and seem to be going down the drain. Neither seem to have any idea what the church of tomorrow will look like, and neither do you or I.

The old is passing away, and while we trust that the God who brings life even out of the grave will bring forth something new, the new is not yet here and is still a mystery to us. We are living in one of those liminal in-between times. It might be another 10 years. It might be another hundred. We might all be like Moses, approaching the cusp of a promised land with hope, but not living to see it open before us.

I was talking with John Sampson the other day and he said that, being a biologist, he sees the transition the church is going through as being like biological evolution. The dominant form of one era is dying out, and countless random mutations produce alternative possibilities, most of which prove to be no better suited to the changed circumstances than the old, but eventually, one of those random mutations will produce something that is significantly better adapted to be able to survive and thrive and it will begin to reproduce itself and fill the empty space. Our little church is one of those random mutations, but we are not the final answer.

We are just one more little attempt to find a new way in a changed and deeply uncertain world. We are one more little group faithfully seeking to find a pathway of new life.

Alison told me the other day about a book she has just started reading called [*How to lead when you don't know where you are going*](#). The back cover describes it as “a practical book of hope for tired and weary leaders who risk defining this era of ministry in terms of failure or loss. It helps leaders stand firm in a disoriented state, learning from their mistakes and leading despite the confusion.”

But the thing is, the challenges of times such as these are not just challenges for leaders. In as much as I have to try to work out how to lead in a time when I don't know where we are going, all of us have to work out together how to faithfully follow Jesus when we don't know where he is going. And that requires us to live with uncertainty, with mystery.

As we heard tonight, Jesus says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth.” Jesus does not say that the Spirit will clear up all mysteries and hand us definitive answers on everything that we should then defend with ruthless determination. “When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth.” Guide you; not set you straight and test your comprehension.

In our first reading we heard the writer of the Proverbs say, “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?” Again we are hearing a promise of guidance, a promise of wisdom to help navigate our way through the uncertainty, but we are not hearing either a demand for unquestioning conformity or a demand to hide any light we come across under a bushel lest it be seen as disrespectful to those navigating by some other light.

We also heard the Apostle Paul speaking of how suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and, at the end of this progression he describes, character produces not clarity and certainty, but hope. And hope, he says, “does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

And maybe for now, in these uncertain times, that is enough to get us through. We have a hope that is grounded in the risen Jesus, and we have the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And if we can rest trustingly in that hope and love, and resist our tendencies to lash out angrily at uncertainty, or to unhelpfully pretend we've got the answers about what needs to happen next, then the mysterious wisdom that breathes hope and life with a lover's breath will hold us safe as we travel through the wilderness in the footsteps of the three-in-one who promises to be with us always.