**Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?   
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;   
beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:   
‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.   
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.   
When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.   
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—   
when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil.   
When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,   
when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,   
when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,   
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

**Romans 5.1-5**

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

**John 16.12-15**

‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’

I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that today is a special day: a day of celebration and gratitude for life-giving relationships and the enduring power of love. So let me start by wishing you a very happy Fathers’ Day. And whether you think it’s a cynical marketing ploy created by the greetings card industry, or a long-overdue recognition of the role that fathers play in family life, I hope we can all agree that a good father is a precious and life-enhancing gift to any child.

How appropriate then, that this year Fathers’ Day falls on Trinity Sunday, the church’s great affirmation of the nature of God, who is defined first and foremost in terms of a family relationship. We believe in one God, we say in the creed, who is simultaneously Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But how can that be? What do we even mean by saying God is both one, and three.

One obvious answer would be to say that God, by his nature, is bound to be beyond human comprehension, and leave it at that. If I’m honest, that’s probably been my approach. Still, the doctrine of the Trinity was important enough for the early church to spend centuries hammering it out, trying to put into words something that stretches our understanding beyond its limits. Down the ages the church has continued to reaffirm its Trinitarian faith, believing that it has something significant to tell us about God.

At its simplest, seeing God as three persons helps us to focus on different aspects of the divine goodness. God the Father is the eternal creator, all-powerful and all-knowing, whose presence no-one can hide from but whose face even the angels dare not look at directly. God the Son came to share our human life in the person of Jesus, teaching, healing, displaying God’s love in action. God the Spirit is the power that flows through the universe giving life to all things, bringing us understanding, inspiration and fruitfulness. Yet these three are also one and the same, not three beings but one God with three states of being.

Over the centuries Christian thinkers have come up with various images to express this mystery. St Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, compared the Trinity to a musical chord, made up of three notes. Here’s a quick illustration: we can begin with one note, which is whole in itself but not anchored into any key or tonality. [C] If we add another to it, it makes a different kind of sound, one where the two notes remain distinct but resonate together. [G] A third note completes the chord, giving it a sense of finality and stability.[E’] Each note can stand alone but also belongs to the other two, and it is in their relationship to each other that their true nature is revealed. Singly, they are only points on a scale; together, they create a whole harmonic structure.

In today’s gospel reading Jesus gives us a different vision of the relationship at the heart of God. “All that the Father has is mine,” he says, and when the Spirit comes, “he will glorify me because he will take what is mine”. So a key element of the Trinity is the passing of gifts from one to another. That understanding is echoed in our reading from Romans, where Paul says our peace with God comes through the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Father’s love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

This gives us a clue that the Trinity is not a fixed structure, but rather something dynamic, where the purpose of each member is to give to the others in an endless cycle of generosity. The 4th century theologians who developed the doctrine of the Trinity referred to the relationship between the three persons of God as a circular dance. Drawing on their vision, the American writer Cynthia Bourgeault has described the Trinity as a continuous outpouring of love from one to another, like the buckets on an old-fashioned watermill. I could do with a visual aid here, but I’m hoping you can imagine what an overset waterwheel looks like: the water flows from a channel above the wheel, falling into the topmost bucket, which then overflows into the bucket below and so on. As the buckets fill, they also move the wheel around, harnessing energy which drives the mill. “Their wonderful and profound insight” (Bourgeault writes) “is that God reveals his own innermost nature through a continuous round-dance of self-emptying…. The energy of love becomes manifest and accessible.”

By this understanding, God is not just a being with three faces. The Trinity is the eternal demonstration of what it means to love. God exists to give with unstinting generosity, to receive with joy and gratitude, and through the power of that giving and receiving to unleash the divine creative purpose.

This matters to us because it transforms our understanding of what our own purpose might be. In the beginning of the creation story, God says “Let us make humankind in our own image”; and the teaching of the church through the ages has been that we should try to conform ourselves more closely to that image. So if God is characterised first and foremost by a relationship of joyful generosity, that is what we are also called to.

A number of recent studies have found that Britain is among the most individualistic societies in the world. As a nation, we tend to place value on ourselves rather than our communities – aided and abetted by advertisers who tell us to “be the best”, “because you’re worth it”. Perhaps not unrelatedly, we also have some of the highest levels of depression and anxiety in the developed world. If we see the Trinity as a picture of a relationship, I believe that tells us something fundamental about our human need for connectedness, and the danger of ignoring that need.

To return to the image of the waterwheel, focusing exclusively on our own achievements and concerns is like trying to trap all the water in our own bucket, stopping the flow that keeps the wheel turning. Not only do we avoid helping others but we also shut off what they – and God – have to offer us. John’s gospel reminds us: “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” Sometimes it can feel as if that grace is faint and far away. The God we hear about in church can seem as abstract as a theological argument, precious little help with real-world issues. Perhaps those are the times when we most need each other, a drip of water from someone else’s bucket to start the wheel turning again.

I’m reminded of the pay-it-forward movement, where people are encouraged to repay acts of generosity, not to the donor but to someone else who needs their help. It could be as little as a smile, or a kind word. That’s all it takes to be caught up into the divine dance, the heavenly economy where those who give most, gain most.

Jesus warned his disciples not to put their faith in personal wealth (for which we might also read success, status, or any of the other obsessions of our era). But he also advised them to throw caution to the winds in their generosity to others. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? …. But love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.” Being children of the Most High God means being drawn into the family relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a relationship of freely chosen self-giving, which results only in joy. It’s the joy of children who know they are loved, and who grow up to pass that love on to others. May that joy be ours, today and always.

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