

## Trinity Sunday, 30th May 2021 Healing Service

### Romans 8:12-17 & John 3:1-17

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit in power upon the disciples, the birth of the church. I was on retreat just up the road at the Companions of Christ Community where some of you will have been on the "Closer" Course run by Susanne Carlsson. I was staying right at the top of the house in the attic, and on the evening of Pentecost, boy, did the wind blow and howl around the roof-tops! If I needed a reminder that the Holy Spirit came in great power at Pentecost, I certainly got it.

The Holy Spirit came and totally transformed the lives of the disciples, changing them into bold witnesses of the resurrection, filled with joy and power to continue the ministry that Jesus had commissioned them to, the sharing of the good news.

A week after our Pentecost celebrations, the church today celebrates God the Trinity - One God, Three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We may find it something of a mystery (nothing wrong with a bit of mystery, I hasten to add) but the concept of a Trinitarian God is at the heart of our Christian faith. Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and as we look at our readings this morning, we find that the Trinitarian God is there in both.

This morning isn't so much an exercise in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity (you may be glad to know!) but rather exploring together how God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is at work in enabling you and me to know and experience a deeply personal and intimate relationship with Him.

Turning first of all to John 3, and the conversation that took place between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Pharisee. Nicodemus had come at night, perhaps for fear of people seeing him with Jesus, and word getting back to his fellow Pharisees.

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (verse 2). I'm not sure what kind of reply I might have been expecting from Jesus, but it probably wouldn't have been what he said next: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

*Born again.* If you look on Wikipedia, it says this:

*Born again, or to experience the new birth, is a phrase, particularly in evangelicalism, that refers to "spiritual rebirth", or a regeneration of the human spirit from the Holy Spirit, contrasted with physical birth. It is a core doctrine of Methodist, Quaker, Baptist, Pentecostal and other evangelical Christian denominations.*

In my younger days as a Christian, you often heard people use the phrase rather disparagingly of anyone or anything to do with "evangelical" Christians - "he's been born

again! (Can't be an Anglican then!)” I think it sometimes didn't register that Jesus was actually the author of these words!

"I tell you the truth" Jesus said, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

No Jewish credentials, which tribe you were born into, your status as a Pharisee or Sadducee, and no Christian credentials - your Christian ancestry, Anglican or Baptist heritage (or Vineyard / Hillsong etc) has any worth as far as membership of God's kingdom is concerned. That's all flesh-talk, the stuff that St Paul acknowledged he had once put confidence in. To see or to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born again from above.

Born of the Spirit.....that's what happened to the disciples at Pentecost. They were born from above. Before that day, yes, they'd been following Jesus; he'd been their teacher and leader; they had seen the risen Jesus and they had called him Lord and worshipped him. But on the day of Pentecost, when they received the promised Holy Spirit, they began a new spiritual life. Yes, they were filled with power and boldness; but, first and foremost, they were filled with the very presence of Jesus Christ.

It was so clear that the Holy Spirit's primary purpose was to assure them of Christ's very presence within them, that on occasions in the New Testament, we find different expressions used to describe the Holy Spirit. So, in Acts 16:7, when Paul and his companions tried to enter Bithynia, the "Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." In Galatians 4:6, Paul says, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts". The Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of the Son are used interchangeably with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the One who enables Jesus to live within us, and who births us into this new kingdom of God life. We are no longer just earthly, flesh beings, but Kingdom of God, spiritual beings. Yes, we're fully engaged with our journey here on earth, physical beings birthed by our physical mother. But born again from above, we journey through this life as spiritual beings, citizens of another Kingdom, with a new Kingdom heart and mind, with an eternal and heavenly mindset and destiny.

We are different and we should be approaching life and its purpose with a different perspective, and behaving in ways, at times, that the people around us - at the school gate, in our workplace, even within our families - won't understand! When did you last experience that? That feeling of, "They don't get me!" You're a bit of a mystery to people sometimes. I think that's what Jesus was meaning when he said (vs.8), "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Holy Spirit".

I remember, when I was about 15, my brother and I waiting at Ashted station. It wasn't uncommon for us to use the odd swear word or five in conversation, and as we chatted I threw in an expletive - only for my brother to reply: "Oh, that's not very nice!" Apart from feeling a bit miffed, I was also slightly mystified, but then began to realise that yes, my brother had stopped swearing. I didn't know why, but what I discovered a little later on, was that he had recently become a Christian. Born again, of the Spirit, his behaviour was

beginning to change - and looking back, that moment on the platform was definitely a "the wind is blowing, and I have no idea where it's coming from or where it's going" moment.

How is the wind of the Spirit blowing in you? Leading you, guiding you, changing you?

Turning to our passage from Romans 8, Paul says in verses 12-14: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation - but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship (the Spirit of Sonship also translates as adoption to sonship). And by him we cry "Abba, Father." The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

If we have been born from above, we become sons of God, God's children. This gives us a wonderful new status and a responsibility, too.

First, our status. By the Spirit, we cry "Abba, Father".

You may remember me telling you the story of how I became a Christian when I was 17, watching "Jesus of Nazareth" on Good Friday. A couple of weeks later and we were back at school. And I vividly remember standing on the platform at Wimbledon station (yes, another station platform moment!) with my friend, Jane. Jane was a Christian (and unknown to me had been praying with a friend for me, every week for that past year). Very tentatively, concerned that she might think I'd gone mad, I began to explain that "something happened during the Easter break, and I know this might sound strange, but it's like I know that God's my Father". Jane was so calm and collected in her response, but later told me how excited she was as I shared this news with her.

I had no idea about this passage from Romans, but what I was saying to Jane was exactly the truth of Paul's words, "By him we cry "Abba Father". The Spirit had testified with my spirit that I was now God's child and I could call him my heavenly Father. If the Holy Spirit enables us to know that Jesus is within us, he also gives us this deep assurance that God is our Father and we are his children whom he loves, as he loves his very own Son.

Sometimes, even as mature Christians, we can wonder if we've been filled with the Holy Spirit, especially, perhaps, if we can't ever remember a time when we weren't a Christian. Well, if you find yourself praying to your heavenly Father, to Father God, then be assured that you have the Holy Spirit living in you, because it's only by the Holy Spirit that you are enabled to know God as your Father. As Jesus promised, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we (WE!) will come and make our home with him" (i.e. inside you) - that's John 14:23.

So, the Holy Spirit enables us to know God as our Father. And with this new relationship, comes an extraordinary new status and new privileges. "Adoption as sons" - to be adopted as a son, in Roman society, was to be given the highest privilege and status possible. Adoption to sonship enabled a wealthy but childless man to legally take into his family a young slave, whose life was utterly transformed as he became a son and heir, chosen to

inherit the man's estate and to perpetuate his name. This is a picture of what God has done for us, except on a whole different, glorious and eternal plane, for as Romans 8:17 reminds us:

"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." God the Father has made us co-heirs with his One and Only Son, giving us the same eternal inheritance as Jesus Christ. What is His by right as *the* heir, has become ours by God's grace.

We have been given a new status as children, sons of God, co-heirs with Christ. Of course, like an heir, there are responsibilities that come with the privilege, and we are called to be ready to share with Christ in his sufferings, surrendering our life to him, and in Paul's words, "living not according to the sinful nature but putting to death the misdeeds of the body". As God's children, one of our commitments is to co-operate with the Holy Spirit, allowing him to change and transform us more and more into the family likeness of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I was grateful to be reminded on my retreat this week that when we've been on the Christian journey for quite a while, we may not find it so easy to detect how we are being changed. It doesn't necessarily mean we aren't "putting to death the misdeeds of the body". It's often change that is rather more subtle than some of the behaviour that God works on when we're newly born (like my brother suddenly not wanting to swear anymore!) Are you aware of this process of change going on within you, co-operating with the Holy Spirit? Don't panic if you're not - just talk to your heavenly Father about it and ask him to gently show you what area in your life it is that he would like to help you become more like Him. And in our time of Confession in just a few moments, we remember how our God is a compassionate Father who always welcomes us with outstretched arms and forgives us when we repent of our sin.

So, as I draw to a close, we're reminded this morning that God the Trinity, one God three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - isn't just an interesting bit of theology or a Christian doctrine: together as One, the Three enable you and me to have a deeply personal relationship with God. Knowing the presence of Jesus deep within our beings; being able to talk with and to God as our Father, because we have become his children; children who have also been given the extraordinary privilege of sharing in the glorious and eternal inheritance of His Son. Called to grow into the likeness of God himself, as we co-operate with the Holy Spirit living within us, to live as Kingdom citizens, born again, born from above, born of the Spirit.

Amen.