

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, year 'B'
7 June, 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

And in the temple of the Lord, all are crying, "Glory!"

- Psalm 29: 9

Trinity Sunday is the preacher's booby-trap; no matter what you say, you are most likely going to say something heretical. So fearful am I, in fact, of saying something which is on the wrong side of the theological law, that I have only twice preached on Trinity Sunday – and one of those times, when I was the curate in High River, was not planned. A dear friend was slated to preach, but he cunningly got lost driving into High River from a weekend retreat in Kananaskis and arrived in time only for coffee hour! But here I am – thankfully six feet above contradiction – unable to fob off my responsibilities to expound for you the mysteries of the Holy Trinity. But don't worry: I have no intention of boring you with dry talk of pericorenesis, homoousias, or modalism. A neat and compact summation of Trinitarian theology can be found in the Collect of the Day – you can see it for yourself on page six of the service sheet:

“Father we praise you: through your Word and Spirit you created all things. You reveal your salvation in all the world by sending to us Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Through your Holy Spirit you give us a share in your life and love. Fill us with the vision of your glory, that we may always serve and praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”

We often speak of and about the mystery of the Trinity. Mystery in this context isn't a puzzle, a problem, that we may one day be clever enough to solve; it is not something to which there is an absolute and final answer. This mystery – and this is true in general when we speak of any theological or biblical mystery – is a deep truth which, the more we explore it, the more we delve into it, the deeper and more unfathomable – and richer – it becomes. And so today we come simply to get lost in the mystery of the Trinity and in so doing give room to let some deep truths about God penetrate us.

I am reminded of a story told, I think, about the great ballerina Pavlova. An admirer saw her dance the dying swan and gushed to her, “That was beautiful. But tell me, what did it mean?” “You stupid man,” she replied, “would I have danced it if I could have told you?” There are some things, some mysteries, that mere words cannot express. Music can help as can dance or the visual arts and even great poetry. And so I want to suggest this morning that doing what we are doing now – offering to God the finest worship we can – is a means for you and me to begin to plumb the depths of the mystery of the Trinity.

What did T. S. Eliot say in the *Four Quartets*?

“You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report.
You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.”

The last sentence of our collect asks God to “Fill us with the vision of your glory” so that we might be transformed, uplifted, even transfigured as the prophet Isaiah was. The scene described in this morning’s first reading is the prophetic vision of God *par excellence*. Isaiah is standing in the temple, close to the priests of the Lord, and he is given a vision of the true God; he sees what so few can see: he sees Yahweh himself. The reality of the cultic temple worship becomes the vision of the true and mighty God of Israel. Isaiah’s experience of the holy, of the Lord’s true nature, is what will define and give impetus to his prophetic life. Once he sees the Lord in all his glory, Isaiah proclaims with urgency and insistence, the absolute transcendent holiness of the Lord.

It is a grand vision grandly told in autobiographical terms. Impressive it must have been, for what Isaiah saw in the year King Uzziah died was to shape his entire mission, his prophetic role and his theology. Nowhere else in the Old Testament are we afforded such a stirring vision. There are apocalyptic ecstasies, to be sure, but they are written in the language of allegory and symbol. No one would mistake one of Daniel’s visions to be the “real thing”. No – these kinds of visions are attempts, using the language of poetry, to express one man’s experience of God. There is poetry here in Isaiah, but it is grounded in the absolutely personal and plausible. Reading this passage, we seem to be reading a record of actual events; Isaiah is reporting his actual vision, incredible as it seems. The biblical scholar G. G. D. Kilpatrick wrote:

“[To Isaiah] suddenly there came an awareness of the divine reality behind the symbolism. The vision is described in terms of ceremony, but the interpretation Isaiah put upon things visible is proof of his spiritual perception.”¹

The vision in the temple was the most important event in Isaiah’s life because it established his theology and mode of prophesying in the name of “Holy One of Israel”. The worship of Israel in his time was in pretty low water, and Israel’s collective life of righteousness grossly neglected. Isaiah was called into the presence of Yahweh in the year King Uzziah died and was given a vision of Holiness in order that he might proclaim to the nations that the Holy One of Israel desired Israel herself to be holy. The vision of glory was not the crazed raving of a solipsistic prophet or deluded priest, but was indeed a revelation of the very stuff of Yahweh’s mercy by which people and nations are purified to be worthy of being holy. And the purification was severe indeed – as severe as having a live coal touch the lips.

That is to say, the worship of the Triune God is a costly, demanding enterprise. It is costly because it requires us to learn to set aside our priorities, our preferences and prejudices, so that God may have space to come to us and into us. It is costly because to

¹ G. G. D. Kilpatrick in *The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VII*, p. 205.

catch even a fleeting glimpse of the glory of the Lord means that we will know ourselves to be puny and unclean. It is costly because it calls us to live a life which finds its pattern in the glory of the gore of Calvary. And it is most costly because to worship is to lay ourselves open to the severe mercy of God's purifying love. No doubt the *means* of worship can become superficial and desiccated. Nonetheless it is by and through worship that humans approach not only the mystery but also the reality of the Triune God and this fundamental truth must be asserted again and again. Our first duty as Christians is not to one another or to the world but to the God of all, without whom nothing exists. Our lives must be centred in and purified by the worship of God if they are to have any meaning, if they are to show forth the splendours of that same God to the world that is so desperately seeking him.

Worship must therefore betoken the values of the Kingdom: sacrifice, equality, order, justice, and beauty; worship must remind us that in all things God is first; worship must point beyond this flawed world of sham and ugliness to the glorious world of God. We should consider our worship as neither a sort of grim duty nor an excuse for half-baked exercises in self-conscious political correctness but as the spiritual fuel we need for our journey. It must, in short, be a symbol of the unimaginable and glorious kingdom of God which even now breaks in on this broken world. And may it therefore be not just our bounden duty and service but our joy, our delight, and our life.