

In the Name of God,  
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
 Amen.

19 June 2011 — *Trinity Sunday*

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Cantic 2: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Preached at Grace Church, Elmira, by the Rev'd Fr. D.W. Matthews+

Once upon a time, a Rector, a Master of Ceremony and a Sexton stood in the Narthex chatting over parochial matters. They were concerned that the Chief Sacristan had not put the oblations on the credence, as well as the fact that the Deacon's dalmatic was missing from the vesting Sacristy and the thurible had been misplaced somewhere in the working Sacristy. Moreover, they had just learned that the piscina was running sluggishly and the luna from the monstrance was no where to be found. At that moment the Verger of the parish came to inform the Priest that there were no consecrated hosts in the ciborium or wine in the flagon in the Ambry, begging the question of the extinguishing of the Tabernacle light. Needless to say, they were pondering what the next possible challenge might be arriving at their doorstep that morning . . . . .



Now, in order to understand any or even a part of this little story I have just told, one has to have some degree of acquaintance with the sometimes ancient language and vocabulary of the Church — and, more particularly, the Anglican or English Church. I remember in seminary one of my National Baptist friends commenting on that fact that we Episcopalians still have a room that we refer to as the “*Sexton’s Office or Workshop*” while in her church the same door is marked, “*Janitor’s Closet.*” The truth is that this gentle comparison serves well for us a point to ponder, for it is a far more serious matter than just the eccentricities of our ecclesiastical nomenclature, my friends. This is a matter that can go to the very heart of what is going on in our Church itself and I can think of no better Sunday than this — Trinity Sunday when we dwell on the very being of God — to think on such things.



“*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God of Hosts!*” It is so familiar that we are almost incapable of recapturing the shock and awe — the sheer terror that swept over the Prophet Isaiah that day in the Temple as he experienced his vision of God’s presence. It disappoints me that the lectionary has changed the tradition of hearing this vision from the sixth chapter of Isaiah’s book, which was always read on Trinity Sunday, because the Hebrew superlative — the same adjective repeated three times — has long been seen as a picture of perfection, here of the perfection of God Himself. If the word “God” means anything at all, we ought to expect not to be able fully to understand whatever it is that — or who

— we are referring to. In other words, my friends, when we are talking of God, we are always in danger of blundering in our own arrogance. Like old King Uzziah, waving our own little theological schemes like home-grown incense in front of the living God, we end up talking about God in some rather bizarre ways rather than in the learned ways of centuries of thoughtful prayer, meditation and dialogue. As the great contemporary theologian of our tradition, Bishop N.T. Wright, has said, *“There is a special sort of theological leprosy which is reserved for this sort of folly.”*

The function and rhythm of the Holy Scriptures and the way we worship — what we call, the liturgy — is to keep us from this kind of despair. It is to equip us with a language *per se*, that is “God speak,” whereby the glory and majesty of the Being, work and purposes of the God we seek is seen again and again and again. In my own life journey and spiritual experience, you can always tell when the proof is in the pudding because the real thing always dazzles you and leaves you absolutely exhausted much more than it terrifies and kills you. Isaiah didn’t try to *analyze* God, rather he wanted to simply fall down and evaporate before God — much like blessed Saint Paul lying prone on the road to Damascus. Like Saint Paul, he stood forgiven before his Creator, and like Paul, he was then commissioned with a message of heartache and joy as well as sorrow and love. It is from these experiences that we learn of God and it is from living in the communion of His people day-by-day — the Church — that we learn how to speak of God.



Some time ago I attended a teleconference led by William Willimon, who at the time was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He was speaking at the time to a group of clergy who were preachers whose sermons often appeared in the *Washington Times* in their weekly feature on Mondays. His purpose in the seminar was to discuss with them the use of their language of Christianity, with its vocabulary of words such as redemption, atonement, sanctification and, I would add, even

the word, resurrection. His caution to those of us who preach often was powerful: *“I want to argue that the public may have trouble understanding you when you preach, NOT because what you’re dealing with is primitive and pre-scientific and pre-Enlightenment and all — it is all of that. But because what you are saying is true. And we live in a culture of deceit and lies. The difficulty is that you are speaking about God in a world that has told me from birth that ‘I am God’, that there is no greater arbiter of judgement than my own desires.”* Dr. Willimon concluded, *“You have to sit through the vocabulary. You have to get moved. You have to bend your life toward this in a way that is not natural. So, I prefer now to speak more in terms of collision than communication . . . .”*

Collision instead of communication . . . . In so many ways, I find such truth in this

statement today. If we take the Gospel out of the context of the faith community and our language, it seems to hardly make sense to the world around us . . . to the world around us we are speaking “Babel.” On the Day of Pentecost, Blessed Saint Luke records the response to that great initial proclamation of the Good News by the Spirit-filled apostles (Acts 2:12): *“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does it mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” Remember that from last week?*

Now, here on Trinity Sunday, we speak of the very nature and being of God as Three in One and One in Three — Father, Son and Holy Ghost — Creator, Word and Sanctifier. My friends, no matter what it is that we are speaking of, it remains the task of the Church to convert our ears — the very world around us — to take these great words and, as William Willimon says, to bend our life, our thoughts, our hearts toward these truths. It means that we must find the courage to speak of the experience of God in our own faith as well as convert the language we use to an understanding that the world that surrounds us can access, both intellectually and sensually, through whatever experience they can gain of the Almighty One.

When we collide with the Good News of the Gospel, things will never be the same. That is called conversion, and it is one of the goals of the Christian life. To me it does not lie in making sense in our terms of what God has done in Christ, but in hearing that Good News afresh, and being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The vocabulary of our faith IS important, yet the interpretation of that vocabulary through a living faith to a world that does not have the means to know and live and speak of resurrection remains our task. In this secular and even pagan silence, may we not only speak, but may we do so with great joy as we give thanks for all that God, the Source of all creation, remains to and for us each day.