

## Person Centred Church – Person Centred Theology

### John 17:20-26 / 1 John 4:16b-19

One of the most eloquent conversion stories I heard was told by a friend who is in many ways quite enclosed and self-contained, and for a period of her life stayed in a remote cottage on the edge of a village. As she went into the village to get things from the shop she was surprised at how many people spoke to her and the general level of their friendliness. They didn't pressure her to come out of herself, but they were always open and helpful and thoughtful towards her. After a while, she discovered many belonged to a church and so she started going along herself. And in that church she discovered for herself the trinitarian God who we Christians uniquely believe in, and who she had been experiencing daily in the lifestyles of the villagers.

#### **Trinitarian God: Persons at the Centre of the Church**

Stanley Grenz is one of a whole rash of theologians who've unearthed tremendous riches through reflection on the Trinity over recent years, revealing it as probably the most significant theological truth – found both at the heart of Christian faith and at all places to its extremities. Grenz says, *“The ultimate basis of the church lies in its relationship to the nature of the triune God... Our fellowship is nothing more than our common participation in the divine communion between Father and Son, mediated by Holy Spirit.”*

When I've used the phrase “person-centred church” some people have been anxious that this might focus solely on the individual spiritual journey, or the church as a collection of individuals. One thing I want to do in this sermon is to root my vision of the church firmly in the revelation of God as Trinity – persons in communion: Father, Son, and Spirit, and to show how the Trinity themselves redefine the idea of a “person” as being defined by their relationship and communion with others.

When Jesus prayed for the church he said, **“I pray for those who will believe in me... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”** (John 17:20-23) We often read this as prayer for institutional unity between various branches of the church, but it's far more than that. Notice how Jesus highlights the interplay between the many and the one, flowing out of and absolutely connected to his one-ness with the Father through trinitarian relationship. As Frank Viola says, *“The Church is an organic extension of the triune God.”* (Reimagining Church p.35)

In this sermon I want to address three questions:

What is the Trinity like?

What is a person made and restored in God the Trinity's image?

What kind of church flows from this Holy Trinity?

So first of all, what is the Trinity like?

### **A Problem to be Solved?**

A lot of people think of the Trinity as a way of describing a mathematical impossibility: three yet one, one yet three. But rather, it's a way of describing a relationship – the formative relationship for all things because it's the relationship of God who created all things. Other people describe the Trinity as a Monarchical Procession: first comes the Father who's the King, then the Son – sent out by the Father, then the Holy Spirit. But that gives all the wrong signals about relationships being directed, paternalistic, dependent, and authoritarian – and furthermore, it's not true to the Christian faith we find in the ancient Creeds of the church. So the first way of seeing the Trinity is a mathematical problem, and the second is an emotional and political problem.

### **A Dance to be Entered Into**

Over the last 40 years there's been a revolution in Trinitarian Theology, much of it brand new creative thinking yet still reaching back to Christian traditions from the earliest centuries. And a key word to describe the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit is the Greek word *perichoresis* which means a mutual indwelling, a reciprocity, an equal service, self-offering, celebration of the other, moving together yet with individuality. It's a dance ("choreography") in which the partners not only encircle and weave in and out of one another, but "so intimate is the communion that they move in and through each other so that the pattern is all inclusive" (Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p.72)

Suddenly the Trinity's emerging in a more attractive light. Let me quote at length from Shirley Guthrie, *"The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual: it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony... They are what they are only in relationship with one another... There is no solitary person separated from the others; no above and below; no first, second, third in importance; no ruling and controlling and being ruled and controlled; no position of privilege to be maintained over against others; no question of conflict concerning who is in charge. Now there is only fellowship and communion of equals who share all that they are and have in their communion with each other, each living with and for the others in mutual openness, self-giving love and supper; each free not from, but for, the others. That is how Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related in the inner circle of the Godhead."* (Shirley C. Guthrie *Christian Doctrine*, p.93)

### **Friends, Companions, Partners**

Do you like the sound of that God? You should do, listen how Guthrie continues: *"If in God's own deepest inner being God is such a community seeking God, then that is what God is in relation to us. Gone is the hierarchical, monarchical, patriarchal God who asserts, defends and maintains sovereign freedom and power at the expense of God's creatures... It is freedom and power exercised not to keep us dependent slaves, but to set us on our feet and empower us to be God's faithful friends, companions and partners."*

And he goes on, *"Consider now the implications of this understanding of the triune God for the self-understanding and life together of humans beings created in the image of God."* We'll come on to that later! But what a beautiful picture of God is emerging. Suddenly the God of theology and Jesus of the gospels seem to be more in sync. The grace of Jesus is exactly what we would expect to see in the human face of this God.

### **The Trinity at Play**

Some of you have been reading a book called “The Shack” by William P. Young in which Mack, who's been deeply hurt by life events, meets God finding the three persons surprisingly playful. “Papa” (God the Father) reveals him or herself in the form of a large, beaming, Afro-American mama. Jesus is a Middle-Eastern labourer, and the Spirit, an Asian woman called Sarayu. *“Which one of you is God?” Mack asked. “I am,” said all three in unison.*” (p.87) I thoroughly recommend it – especially the part where Jesus drops the sauce all over the floor and Papa's feet.

Let's move on: What does the Trinity tell us about the nature of persons? Or what is a person made and restored in God the Trinity's image?

### **Trinity and Personhood**

If you look at Jesus simply within the history of religions, perhaps the two most distinctive contributions he made to religious endeavour was to reveal God as Trinity and salvation through the cross. Almost everything else about Christianity you can find in some form somewhere else. But what does this amazing revelation of God as Trinity tell us about the nature of persons?

Well, Jesus didn't simply say, “there are these three persons” - he presented himself with them in relationship. The Father is father because he has a Son. The Son is son because he has a father. The Spirit is spirit of the Son and the Father. Leonardo Boff, a passionate and wonderful Brazilian theologian, says, *“The union of the Father and the Son does not blot out the difference and individuality of each. Union rather presupposes differentiation... [Yet] each person acts in union with the others... the father creates through the Son in the union of the Spirit. The Son, sent by the Father, becomes flesh by virtue of the life-giving Spirit. The Spirit comes upon Mary... sent by the father at the request of the Son.”* (Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp.5-6)

### **Persons “in relationship”**

The problem is that when we use the word “person” we tend to think of “individual” but God the Trinity shows us that *“true personhood arises not from individualistic isolation, but from love and relationship with others – from communion.”* (John Zizioulas, *Trinitarian Theology Today*, pp. 58-9) And so when I talk about the Person Centred Church, this isn't simply about individuals on their personal journeys, but individuals discovering what Trinitarian personhood through Jesus is all about: In other words, persons coming into new relationship and new community. And this, I believe, is how God made us – in God's Trinitarian Image. Listen to Stanley Grenz once more:

*“The image of God, is a social, rather than an individual reality. The biblical focus is on “we” being the divine image, rather than the image being lodged within each individual.”* (An interview with Stan Grenz from *Talk*). In the beginning God said “Let us make humankind in our image... male and female he made them.” (Gen. 1:26-27) To make just a single person simply wouldn't have been humanity in God's image. But the essence of personhood is to be in relationship. Yes, we are individual and uniquely, wonderfully made, but we're made to exist in relationship with others. I derive my personhood and personality not only through who I am in myself, but through who I am in relation to others – as my personal history develops – and even through my ancestry, passed down through genes.

David Attenborough once described humans as “compulsive communicators”. It seems even to the anthropologist that we're made for company. Occasionally you read about a child who's been kept locked in a room all their lives: the result is horrific and it takes incredible patience, love, and nurture to reverse even a fraction of the damage. The Trinitarian God has made us for relationship. The Person-Centred church rejoices in individuality but part of our on-going conversion is the our opening out to one another, accepting the discipling which teaches us to handle freedom and offer service.

### **Person-Centred God : Person-Centred Church**

What kind of church flows from this Trinity?

#### **Loving**

When I imagine relationship within the Trinity, one of the first things I see is how much they *love* each other. Tertullian, who lived at the end of the Second Century said this was what marked Christians out, “See how they love each other” - as Jesus had said in John 13:35 **“By this shall people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.”**

#### **Laughing**

Then I see the Trinity *laughing* together and celebrating what the others are doing: Jesus burst out with joy when he said, **“I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to little children – for this was your good pleasure.”** (Matt. 11:25) And in the same way the person-centred church is a place of celebration and laughter – not because you a funny person up at the front each week, though some churches do – but because we rejoice in the unique gifts of each member.

#### **Serving**

Then I see the Trinity *servicing* one another. Jesus said, **“The Son does nothing on his own but only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son does also.”** (John 5:19) in Luke we see Jesus doing miracles “because the power of the Lord was with him to heal.” (Luke 5:17) Later he talks about sending the Holy Spirit, who will come in his name. All the time these persons in communion are serving one another with grace and delight.

#### **Conversing**

Then I see them *conversing* together. And when we pray we enter into that conversation – not just idle chit chat, although prayer can be that quite rightly, but conversation with purpose, with a goal – and that's what intercessory prayer is all about. Paul Fiddes says, *“Through intercession we enter a great ocean of interconnectedness, a community in which God does indeed give purpose to ‘the whole’.”* (Participating in God, p.129) God converses within the Trinity, and reaches out to draw us into that conversation also.

*Cont...*

### Welcoming

So then I see them *welcoming*, and welcoming – showing hospitality - is intrinsic to the revelation of God throughout the Bible. This is why it matters that God is Trinity and not merely “binity” - in other words three, rather than two. Two might simply live in each other's gazes, but three produces a dynamic that is always outward looking. It's the Trinity rather than a binity that goes out of themselves to make, and then through grace redeem the world. Jesus said, **“Whoever comes to me I will certainly not cast out.”** (John )

### Weeping

And then I see them *weeping* together, their tears bringing about an impassioned outburst of energy for change. We often find ourselves affected by the situations of others and sometimes it just weighs us down all the more. But when the Father Son and Spirit weep their tears move together to whirl up in a new action of redemptive change. That's why the Bible says, **“Bear one another's burdens”** (Gal ) and why Jesus said **“you are the light of the world”** (Matt 6) because in the power of God's Spirit we can make a difference to the dark places.

### Organic Extension

Let me quote Frank Viola one last time: *“When the church is functioning according to its nature it offers interdependence instead of independence, wholeness instead of fragmentation, participation instead of spectatorship, connectedness instead of isolation, solidarity instead of individualism, spontaneity instead of institutionalism, relationship instead of programmes, service instead of dominance, enrichment instead of insecurity, freedom instead of bondage, community instead of corporation, bonding instead of detachment... it is the organic expression and physical extension of the Trinitarian Community.”* (Reimagining Church, pp. 111, 148).

And the church is just the beginning - **“the first fruits of a new creation”** as St Paul says. The final vision is for all creation to participate in this wonderful, person-centred, Trinitarian life.

Amen!