

SERMON FOR TRINITY SUNDAY | 27.05.18

This week Ken Thompson and I have been reading the same book, writer by the sketch writer Andrew Brown and the sociologist Linda Woodhead: *That Was the Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* (Bloomsbury, 2016). Now Ken is a proper thinker, formerly professor of Sociology at the Open University and respected internationally for his insights into the interface between sociology and religion. So I wasn't surprised that he, like Andrew Goddard and others, tore into the book for its lack of accuracy, its thin disguise of opinion over balanced observation – and its pages and pages of what can only be described as Church gossip!

On the other hand, I read the account (as a non-sociologist) with interest as it teased out some of the bigger questions about the Church over the last thirty years – and I found that some of the insights struck very substantial chords with what I have been thinking over the years.

Same book, rather different reactions!

But then isn't that true of almost everything we engage in: we often don't 'see' things in the same way as even those we love and generally share the same outlook with... ?

Today is a May Bank Holiday week-end and perhaps not the time to grapple with one of the most demanding ideas that the Church teaches: the Holy Trinity. Trinitarian theology is especially hard as the ideas are not straightforwardly rooted in familiar passages of the Bible but something the Church has had to deduce from everything that had been taught by the prophets and by Jesus himself. It is a theory that only makes sense if you can collect all the bits together and are prepared to work at the background.

Which some clearly haven't done! Talk to any Jehovah's Witness: they make very short work of the Trinity. If it isn't explicitly laid out in the Bible then it can't be true – and so they go on to invent a hotchpotch idea of Jesus being a kind of semi-divine being and not God at all! So I want to share just one idea with you this morning to see if it helps.

The key idea is comes of the **Book of Exodus** and from the meeting of **Moses with God**. I say 'meeting' but we all remember that even **Moses' meetings with God** were conducted at a distance – **Moses' face** was always veiled and, most famously he met with **God** who appeared in the form of a burning bush. For our purposes the important line from **God** is this: *But, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.*

So what do we do with this wonderfully familiar passage from **Isaiah** as today's first reading? *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance and each one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

Even in a vision, surely that isn't allowed?! *No can see my face for no one may see me and live...*

Not surprisingly that is exactly where the **Early Church** got stuck. It just didn't add up. How could **Isaiah** see **God**? They needed a theory and so they turned to **St John's Gospel**. After years of poring over the pages they began to see a way through.

In **St John Chapter 12** we have just seen **Jesus 'transfigured'** on the mountain-top. **Jesus** was seen in all his glory by his closest friends, **Peter James and John**. We know that story very well.

So how come it was **OK** for **Jesus** to be seen in his glory 'high and lifted up' - but not **God** himself? Does that mean that the **JWs** are right after all.

But let's read on: **St John** continues to describe that event with the disciples whinging that whatever **Jesus** does, the hard-line leaders of the **Jewish community** still won't believe in him.

So **St John** takes us back to the **Old Testament** and to good old **Isaiah** whom he quotes: *(God) blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts so that they can neither see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts so that he could heal them...* And then **St John** finishes with this punchline: *Isaiah said this because he saw **Jesus' glory** - and spoke about him.*

What does that mean: what is St John saying? And the simple conclusion that St John seems to be sharing with us is that Isaiah did not see God the Father in this passage; he saw God the Son 'high and lifted up'. John has made a completely new link. If, as we read in Exodus, *No can see my face for no one may see me and live...* and Isaiah survived the meeting, then he must have seen Jesus.

Let's just take moment to absorb that. What this Gospel story has done – and remember it was written by a theologian not a direct disciple of Jesus, and it was written at least forty years after Jesus' death – is to say that, having thought about it, John believed that what Isaiah saw eight centuries before was the same as what the disciples saw at the Transfiguration – the glory of Jesus - not the glory of his Father which would have been too much to cope with.

St John had 'thought and thought', just like Winnie the Pooh, and this is how he has squared the circle. Jesus is the form of God whom we can see and know - without being entirely overwhelmed...

So what about the other story from St John in today's Gospel? Here Jesus is meeting Nicodemus, another big thinker. Locked away in a secret room in the middle of the night, Jesus tells him he can't see God either (here expressed as seeing the Kingdom of God) *unless he has been born from above.*

Nicodemus, bright though he is, is entitled to be confused. *Do I have to be born again in my mother's womb?* he mumbles.

It is at this point that St John gives Jesus the next bit of the jigsaw to share with Nicodemus – and of course with us: *You must be born from above says Jesus. The wind blows where it chooses and you will hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is for everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

Poor Nicodemus, he had been taught as a good Jew that everyone would go to heaven when they died. So what is going on here? Somehow Jesus has twisted that into: only those who believe in Jesus will go to heaven – and that will only happen when the Spirit of God has given us a form of re-birth to make it possible for people to believe.

And it is only when the penny has dropped for Nicodemus that Jesus comes up with one of the most famous lines anywhere in the New Testament: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

You will find those words on tee-towels and tee-shirts, on mugs and on mousemats. It is the Jesus manifesto and it sums up the Trinity conundrum too.

- **We can't see God the Father but he wants to show us his glory, just like he wanted to show Isaiah.**
- **So he sent Jesus as a man to show us what he is like – sometimes even in a state of glory.**
- **And to make sure that Jesus' work could be seen and known everywhere and for all time, God send his Spirit to be with us who believe because only then could we learn to know him and to love him.**

How complicated is that! But it isn't so hard that we need the JWs to re-write St John's Gospel to make $2+2 = 5$.

And I suspect we will all find different ways of describing the Trinity – just like St Patrick with his shamrock and his crosses.

We all see things from different angles - and that is a good thing. But often, like Nicodemus we need someone to help us through what feel like a bit of a puzzle.

Thank goodness for the Holy Spirit. May he help us to go on discovering the truth of God - for many years to come!