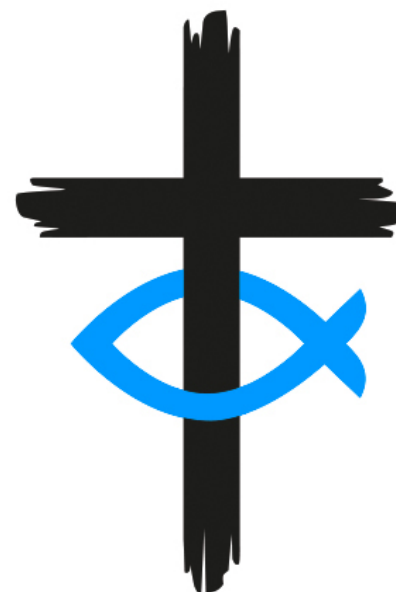


Daily Devotions from the URC
The Holy Trinity



The Rev'd Dr Alan Spence

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>Sunday 7th July Psalm 104 1 - 23</i>	3
<i>Monday 8th July</i>	5
<i>Tuesday 9th July Trinity</i>	7
<i>Wednesday 10th July</i>	9
<i>Thursday 11th July</i>	11
<i>Friday 12th July</i>	13
<i>Saturday 13th July</i>	15

Introduction

Over the next week we will be reading and praying through a short series written by the Rev'd Dr Alan Spence on the Holy Trinity. Alan is a retired URC and convenes our Faith and Order Committee. He was ordained in the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and has worked in the URC since 2001. Like all good theologians (Alan has written a number of books including *Christology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, *The Promise of Peace: A Unified Theory of the Atonement*, *Love Hurts: The Heart of the Christian Story*) he is able to deal with complex ideas in a clear straightforward manner. Over the next 6 days we will see, from the Old and New Testaments, how ideas about God being one underpin both the Jewish and Christian understanding of God. The paradox of the Trinity arose from the realisation that Jesus is Lord and was, and is, worshipped and adored along with the Holy Spirit who, the early Church realised, was guide and animator. Alan weaves together 6 key passages which show the early Christian understandings of the Trinity with poetry, prayer and even quotations from the Athanasian creed. At the same time Alan makes these key ideas clear and vital for our own discipleship and understanding of God. In an age when Christians often find it difficult to articulate our belief in the Trinity it's good to set aside a week to read, reflect, think and pray through our central belief in God.

1 Praise the LORD, my soul,
O praise him!
LORD my God, you are so great!

2 Wrapped in light
as with a garment,
clothed in majesty and state.
Like a tent he spreads the heavens,
3 and above the waters there
Sets the framework of his dwelling,
making it an upper layer.

He makes clouds of heav'n
his chariot;
on the wings of wind he rides.

4 He makes flames of fire
his servants;
winds obey what he decides.
5 He set earth on its foundations,
so that it should never move;
6 Then the deep submerged
the mountains
till the waters stood above.

7 But when you rebuked
the waters,
at your thunder they took flight;

8 They receded to the valleys,
flowing down
the mountains' height
To the place that you appointed.
9 You set bounds to their domain,
So that never will the waters
overwhelm the land again.

10 God makes springs
pour down the valleys.
Streams that flow from every hill

11 Quench the thirst
of all his creatures,
and wild donkeys drink their fill.

12 Birds sing sweetly
in the branches,
nesting by the riverside.

13 From above, the earth is watered,
by God's bounty satisfied.

14 He makes grass grow
for the cattle,
plants for man to cultivate—
Bringing from the earth its produce,
food for all mankind to eat:

15 Wine that to man's constitution
joy and gladness will impart,
Oil that makes the face resplendent,
bread that fortifies the heart.

16 Blessed with water
are the forests—
trees which to the LORD belong,
Mighty cedars that he planted
on the heights of Lebanon.

17 Birds reside among the cedars;
storks upon the pine trees nest.

18 Wild goats live
among high mountains;
conies in the crags find rest.

19 See the moon that marks the seasons; to its setting moves the sun.

20 You send darkness, night approaches; foraging has now begun.

21 Lions roar throughout the forest,
while from God they seek their prey;

22 Comes the sun, they slink back homewards.

23 Man goes out to toil all day

Reflection

I still remember it: the smell of poor quality air at Heathrow Airport. It came as a shock, as until then I was used to breathing New Zealand air. I had contributed to that poor-quality air by flying 12,000 miles by jet aircraft! What I did not know then, but know now, is that the Carbon Dioxide emitted on that, and other, journeys was contributing to the Greenhouse Effect that was beginning to change the Earth's atmosphere; and that, in turn, would begin to raise the average global temperature. I now know that motorized travel and industrialization exacts an environmental cost. A changing climate forms part of the lens through which I now interpret Psalm 104.

This Psalm is a poem of praise to God as Creator and a celebration of the goodness of God's Creation. First, the Psalmist praises God for his character and attributes. God's greatness, honour and majesty are evoked as poetic images drawn from the natural world: God wears light as a garment, the heavens are his tent, the clouds are his chariot, and the winds are his messengers. These natural forces and energies serve God's good purposes reveal his character as a generous Creator.

Second, the Psalmist celebrates the wondrous variety of God's created works: mountains, valleys, life-giving water, donkeys, birds, cattle, grass, plants, grain, wine, oil, trees, goats, lions, and humans. Karl Barth comments that this Psalm reveals a God who preserves all living things 'within their limits'. The challenge of a changing climate begs the question: will humans learn to live within sustainable limits and in

Father, Son and Spirit and recognises a distinction between their persons:

We worship one God in trinity
and the Trinity in unity,
neither confusing the persons
nor dividing the divine being.
(Athanasian Creed)

Prayer

Open my eyes
to the Father's love
that settled on me
before the start of time.
Open my heart
to the Father's Son
who gave himself
that I might be his friend.
Open my being
to the heavenly dove
that she might hover over me
and make me whole again.
Open up O my soul
to the triune God,
eternal love divine.

Reflection

The early Christians were confronted with a number of realities which were theologically perplexing but nevertheless integral elements of their shared faith. They were monotheists who believed that God was one. Yet they offered divine worship to Jesus Christ as Lord, risen from the dead. And in their communal worship they experienced personally the Holy Spirit as a sovereign, divine person lifting their hearts in praise, empowering them with spiritual gifts and transforming their lives.

Christians did not at this early stage seek to explain this set of paradoxes. They did, however, in their greetings and benedictions regularly refer to Father, Son and Spirit as the shared authors of human salvation. The pattern of the Trinitarian affirmation in the passage above is not unusual.

Chosen by the Father

Sanctified by the Spirit

Saved by the blood of Jesus

In expressions such as these the various elements of salvation are attributed to the three divine persons not as absolute distinctions but as appropriate ones. The Father through his love and eternal determination is recognised as the ground of our salvation, or as we might say, the formal cause. Jesus Christ by way of his redemptive life, death and resurrection, is often spoken of as the one who purchased us for God, the material cause of our salvation. The Holy Spirit as the agent of our new birth and spiritual transformation, protecting us for a salvation to be finally revealed is what we might describe as the efficient cause. In the post-apostolic period the Church developed a more compact Trinitarian master-narrative. It became common to speak of the believer coming to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. The formulations of later Trinitarian discussion were further abstracted from the story of salvation, but the intention was the same, that is, to speak of the one God in a way which affirms the divinity of

harmony with God's Creation? Let us resolve to live in partnership with our Creator, and 'Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently, nourish the life of the world in our care' (Shirley Erena Murray).

Prayer

O God our great and generous Creator, clothed in glorious light,
you have spoken Creation into being
and call all created energies to serve your good purposes.
As you preserve all life in its wondrous variety,
help us to respect our environment and fellow-creatures
by living within sustainable limits.
Inspire us to treat the Earth not as a resource to be exploited
but as a gift to be cherished, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Monday 8th July

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Reflection

As Jewish children are tucked into bed at night many are taught to recite the words above. Jews call these verses 'the Shema' and it remains a central feature of their daily devotions. The prayer affirms the essential unity of God, so important an idea for the faith of Judaism, Islam and

Christianity. It is also a public declaration of the name of God as the 'LORD' or 'Yahweh'— 'I am who I am'. This enigmatic expression, which played a key part in the call of Moses', suggests that God is the foundation of all being, the one whose existence is not dependent on another. So awesome is this name of God that many Jews prefer not to say it out loud.

God is, however, not a philosophical concept for our intellectual contemplation, but the living one who invites us into a deep personal relationship. It is not to be a fleeting acquaintance that is soon forgotten, or a superficial friendship where we keep back much of who we really are. Rather, we are called to love God with our whole being.

When one of the scribes asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment he instinctively began with the words of the 'Shema'. 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' He added: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

We are not to forget these words. They are to be on our minds when we go to sleep and when we wake up, when we are at home or when we are abroad. We should carry them with us wherever we go. They are to be a part of our conversation, our everyday talk. The Shema summarises who God is and what God requires of us. Wholehearted love is the appropriate response for us to make to the gracious God who leads us from a world of slavery to the land of promise and peace.

Prayer

Awesome God, maker of heaven and earth,
ground of our being and source of our lives,
You alone are worthy of our praise.
Loving us long before we loved you,

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, come.
Come upon us in our sadness
and clothe us with a garland instead of ashes.
Come promised Counsellor
and lead us gently to the deeper truth
about who you are and who we are.
Come mighty wind
upon the valley of dry bones that is our church;
breathe on this fallen army that we might again live.
Come also upon me holy Comforter
in my own hidden and secret need.
Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen

Saturday 13th July

I Peter 1:1-5

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Reflection

The stories that John recounts in his Gospel are not randomly chosen. They all have deep theological significance. What then is the point of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus? At its heart lies the argument that the spiritual regeneration of the human heart is not a natural event. Rebirth is the work of the Spirit of God. Unless the Spirit opens our eyes we will never recognise the truth of the kingdom. Until the Spirit softens our hearts we remain emotionally closed to the love of God. Every event of spiritual worth in our lives is an outworking of the unseen Spirit of God empowering us. Jesus appears frustrated that certain Jewish theological teachers like Nicodemus don't understand these things.

Further, the story indicates that the Spirit is not a power that can be manipulated or controlled by human words or actions. Simon the sorcerer wrongly thought he could buy the gift of the Spirit (Acts 8:18). The Spirit is rather an independent reality with the sort of freedom seen in a swirling breeze. 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.'

How did early Christians understand the Spirit in relation to God? Their experience of the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and reality of the Spirit in their regular worship was for them the foretaste of the coming kingdom of God and clear evidence of the enthronement of Christ. They understood the Spirit both as the active power of God in the world and also the present reality of the risen Christ among them. What is particularly significant is that they began to view the Spirit in personal terms. It was possible to grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30); certain things seemed good to the Spirit (Acts 14:28); the Spirit forbade Paul to speak the word of God in Asia (Acts 16:6). In short, the early Christians were wrestling with the idea of the Holy Spirit as a divine person, distinct but not separable from the Son and the Father.

Giving your Son for us
while we were still enemies.
Through the transforming power of your Spirit
enable us to love you freely and wholeheartedly.
And to love those we meet just as we love ourselves. Amen

Tuesday 9th July Trinity

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Reflection

Paul encourages his Philippian readers to allow the story of Jesus' humiliation to serve as a pattern for the way they should treat one another. The poetic shape of the passage suggests that it was a popular Christian hymn that Paul had incorporated into his message just as preachers sometimes do today. The historical significance of this particular hymn cannot be overestimated.

In it, one of the earliest pieces of Christian writing in our possession, there is evidence that the first generation of Christians believed Jesus of Nazareth to have had some sort of pre-history. They understood him to have possessed 'the form of God,' but this was not something he held on to or exploited. Rather, he freely chose to empty himself, to take on human form, and to walk the way of servanthood, suffering and death.

How on earth had Christians come to hold such a remarkable view of this young rabbi from Nazareth? Perhaps it was because they had been caught up in the latter part of the hymn, the exaltation of Jesus. They heard of course the stories of his suffering and crucifixion, but they now also knew of his resurrection. Through their dramatic experience of the outpouring of his Spirit they had come to believe that Jesus' had been exalted to the right hand of God. Salvation and forgiveness were part of their personal experience. Week by week as they bowed their knees together in worship they joyfully acknowledged that 'Jesus is Lord.'

No wonder those early Christians felt that the world had been turned upside down. The rules of life had been transformed. The last would be first. The meek would inherit the earth. Death had been defeated. In humility Christians were now to regard others as better than ourselves. All had become new. Jesus had changed everything, even the way they were to think about God. These committed monotheists found themselves offering divine praise to a recently crucified Galilean. How they were to make theological sense of all this was a question that they and Christians after them were left to reflect on.

Prayer

We are aware of pressures on us from every side to downplay the high status of Jesus or distance ourselves from him.

Give me the strength, I pray,
through the trials and temptations of this world,
to hold firm to my first confidence
so that he might stand for me
on that momentous day.

Friday 12th July

John 3:1-10

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

Christian faith and return to the security of their religious past. To counter this tendency the author of the letter encourages his readers to reflect on the significance of the person and work of Jesus. In this section he or she asks them to consider the relation of Jesus to Moses, the revered prophet who had led the Hebrews out of Egypt and brought the law to Israel. It is acknowledged that both these men faithfully served God. But there is, according to the author, a striking difference between them – Moses was a servant of God, Jesus was a son.

The point of this distinction is that it places Jesus in a qualitatively distinct category from Moses and all other prophetic figures. Jesus' unique status derives not from his particular ministry or the redemptive function he performs but from his origin and his being. This understanding of Christ gives rise to what is sometimes known as the scandal of peculiarity, the offence caused to many by the Christian affirmation that Jesus is essentially different from every other servant of God.

To speak of Jesus Christ as the only begotten son of God is, one might say, a metaphor. God does not beget sons as humans do. The value, however, of the idea of sonship for the early Church is that it provides a way of conceiving Jesus as one who came from God and shares in the divine being. As a participant in God's essence it was appropriate for Jesus to be afforded divine honour in Christian worship. And so it was that the early Church's conceptual model of the relation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit came to be shaped by the ideas of sonship and essence.

We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.¹²

Prayer

Having drunk from the wells of salvation
we worship our risen saviour.
Set free from the chains of death
we acknowledge our liberator to be the Lord of life,
His name is for us above all other names.
Transform us we pray into his likeness
so that we too might walk the way
that he chose of humility and service. Amen

Wednesday 10th July

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of [the] father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection

How is the Church to speak coherently of the relation of Jesus Christ to the one true God? Yesterday's reading in Philippians 2 indicates that from the beginning Christian communities, somewhat paradoxically, offered divine worship to a young rabbi who grew up in Nazareth and was crucified outside Jerusalem. Written some forty years later the prologue of John's Gospel presents us with a rich conceptual narrative of that relation. It dramatically declares that at the very beginning there was one existing alongside God, who was the active agent of creation and the source of all spiritual life and light. John describes this divine being simply as the 'Word'. And it was the 'Word' who in the fullness of time assumed human flesh (was incarnated) and lived among us as an itinerant Galilean preacher and healer.

The power of the prologue is not that it explains the relation of the 'Word' to God but rather that it offers a way of conceiving God as one being, who is distinguishable but not separable from his own voice. And this voice is personified by John as he who freely takes to himself human form. The prologue does in poetic narrative what later Trinitarian language seeks to do in more abstract formulae, that is, to offer a conceptual account that recognises both the unity of the God of Jewish faith and the legitimacy of the Christian practice of worshipping Jesus Christ as divine.

The sad irony suggested in the prologue is that when the divine Word, agent of creation and source of all life, humbled himself and came among us in human form, he was not recognised. We, his own people, chose to close our hearts and exclude him from our lives. But to the curious, to those open to his truth, who believed who he was and what he said, he graciously gave the power to become children of God. And this power is not that of human strength or human ingenuity or human diligence. It is, as we shall later see in this Gospel, the divine power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new...
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

(John Donne 1572-1631, Holy Sonnets)

Thursday 11th July

Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house.' Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.

Reflection

Hebrews was written to a dispersed community of Jewish Christians who were apparently being tempted to downplay their recently professed