**26th May 2024 Trinity Sunday**

**Call to worship**

Let us come to God who is Holy Trinity:
God the Father, who creates and sustains us;
God the Son, who saves and keeps us;
God the Holy Spirit, who lives within us.
Let us enter into the mystery of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**A gathering prayer**

Mysterious God,
be with us today as we seek to know you better.
May we learn from each other as we search for you.
Teach us to ask questions as well as to expect answers.
Give us fresh understanding of yourself today.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Lord God, on this Trinity Sunday,
we gather to welcome you into our lives.
May we be open to experience, know and understand you
in new and deeper ways.
As our heavenly father:
**blessed be God forever.**
As Jesus Christ, the Son:
**blessed be God forever.**
As Holy Spirit, bringer of power and fullness:
**blessed be God forever.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Father God, how amazing it is to worship you.
**You are high and lifted up, and your train fills the Temple.**
You consort with angels, yet we are able to reach out and touch you;
how can we ever hope to understand these mysteries?
**You are high…**
You sent your Son to die for us; you lead us by your spirit.
**You are high…**
You call us to follow; you take away all our sin:
**You are high…**
Lord God, how amazing it is to worship you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Nicodemus came to you by night. He didn’t want to be seen for fear of what others would think. We are guilty of hiding too from you, from each other, from ourselves. We hide from experiences we don’t understand. We shy away from the unknown, from uncertainty.
Lord God, grant us a humble spirit to know when we are
not on the right track.
Forgive us when we are falling short
of who we really can be in you.
Help us to stop hiding and give ourselves up to
our new forgiven life, finding new experiences, new joys to share.
Our confidence is in you, Lord.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Our mighty God waits for us to come to him, as Nicodemus came to Jesus.
He knows when we are truly open to him.
He fills that openness with everything we truly need.
He forgives us our sins and gives us peace.
We thank you, forgiving and holy God.
We believe in you and your loving kindness.
We trust you to make us whole.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, Lord, that you have made each one of us unique.
You speak to each one of us in ways we can understand
as you guide us step by step to receive your fullness.
We can’t wait to get to know you better.
We will thank and praise you now, and in eternity.
**Amen.**

**Active worship**

What is it? W E S

Sharing our perspectives and insights.

* Use the story of the ‘blind men and the elephant’ to explore how we can all encounter the same thing but have very different experiences and come to different conclusions. Unless we come together and learn from one another, we see things only from our own perspective. The story is ancient and has been used by many cultures and disciplines. For Christians, it can be a metaphor for how we each bring something to share in trying to unravel the mystery of God.
* There are several ways you could use the story. Watch [an animated version in which the story is read](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qs5cg7fZBc). Have someone read a modern version of the book, or use the [19th-century poem by John Godfrey Saxe](https://allpoetry.com/The-Blind-Man-And-The-Elephant); use mimed actions, with different people reading each verse.

The parable from ancient Hindu texts tells the story of a group of blind men describing an elephant. One man touches its trunk and compares it to a snake. Another feels its ear and compares it to a fan. The third man places his hand on the elephants leg and says it is like a tree trunk. A fourth pushes on the elephant’s side and insists it is like a wall. The fifth man holds the tail and finds it rope like. The last man feels a tusk and declares that the elephant is like a spear.

The story paints a vivid picture of our individual limitations. It is a corrective to our natural arrogance and seems to be a humble approach, offering a framework for respecting all views equally. It is often applied to the view that all religions are equal paths to truth about God.

I think for all those reasons it has some value. And yet I also feel it has some limitations.

It seems respectful. Religions are not right or wrong; each holds an aspect of truth. But the tale works only because the narrator is not blind. He or she sees the whole picture and smiles indulgently at the blind believers arguing over their seemingly ignorant faiths. To say that Christianity or Islam or Hinduism are just three sides of the same truth coin reduces pluralism to a patronizing posture by which we don’t respect others enough to take their beliefs seriously.

Conversely to say ‘I think you’re wrong about this’ need not be disrespectful or unkind. For Christians who are commanded to love even our enemies – let alone the people with whom we disagree – it must not be.

One tutor I had said ‘It’s often said that you should respect other people’s beliefs. But that’s wrong. What’s vital is that you respect other people.’

Indeed when examined more closely , attempting to persuade others to change their beliefs is a sign of respect. You are treating them as thinking agents with the ability to decide what they believe, not just the products of their cultural environment. We shouldn’t be offended when people challenge our beliefs: we should be flattered!

I’m sure that as the election campaign starts those in their various political tribes won’t be applying the elephant parable to their different parties beliefs – we all have some of the truths and we just need to respect each other’s beliefs!

We are more governed by our feelings than by our rationality and emotions run high in debates about beliefs – whether religious or political. But disagreement is not evidence of disrespect. I debate hardest with people I respect the most. I take their ideas seriously. But our society seems to be losing the art of debate within friendships, and we instead surround ourselves with people who think like us.

We can’t deny vital historical facts and how we find truth, objective truth. The incompatibility of religions comes int sharp focus when you examine history Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. Muslims believe that Jesus did not die by that instead he was taken up into heaven. Jews and atheists and agnostics for that matter believe that Jesus died and remained dead. These claims are mutually exclusive.

I have friends who started out as Christians but have since converted to atheism, and vice versa. I wouldn’t dream of telling my atheist friends that Christianity and atheism are two paths to the same truth.  I respect them enough to believe them.

For me, Jesus shows me what god is like. For others Jesus is a mad man. As oxford professor and author C S Lewis famously argued, *Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*

A sense of God W E

The fun of anticipation.

* Prepare a set of envelopes containing different items, a bill, a greetings card, a letter from overseas, a ‘love letter’ (scented), something marked ‘private and confidential’, one that says ‘this is not a circular’, one saying ‘good news awaits you’, and one that contains a small gift. Choose what feels appropriate to your context and offers a good variety.
* Pass the envelopes around, inviting speculation as to what might be inside. Encourage people to be imaginative, even fanciful. Ask: How does it feel to receive something unexpected? What senses might give an idea about the contents? Open the envelopes – who guessed right?
* What senses do we use to explore the mystery of God? Are there some that we don’t use very much? There are many ways of entering into the mystery of God using our senses – e.g. joining in worship, going to a special place. Encourage people to share what is helpful for them.

Craft activities E S

Two options to encourage people to think about God as Trinity.

You will need: strips of different-coloured crepe paper (about 5cm wide and 1m long), or similar; a range of craft materials, long sheets of paper (e.g. strips of lining paper).

Invite everyone to engage in one of these craft activities.

Option 1, make Trinity garlands. Working in twos or threes, weave or braid strips of crepe paper together to make a garland. These could be worn, or groups could come together to make even longer garlands that could be hung up as decorations.

Option 2, ‘image of God’ collage. Draw, make, paint, something to represent any aspect of your understanding of God as Holy Trinity. Try to think beyond ‘Father, Son and Spirit’.

A simple worship activity W E S

Reflect on all the ways in which people describe God.

You will need: lots of small pieces of paper or sticky notes, pens.

* Set up a visual focus such as an icon of the Holy Trinity, an open Bible or a cross.
* Invite people to think of words that describe God. They could be biblical words but encourage people to think of their own words too. Write or draw something to represent each word on a piece of paper.
* After a while, ask people to bring the words and place them around the visual focus, making a carpet of words about God. Encourage people to look at what others have brought to the display, and to ask themselves: Who is God for me? You could end with the Prayer for all ages together.

**Isaiah 6.1-8, John 3.1-17**

**Sermon**

Rishi Sunak called a general election for July 4th. He got drenched in rain as he did it and had to contend with some protesters outside the gates of Downing Street blasting out music, the 90s track ‘Things can only get better’ – that Tony Blair sued for his election victory in 1997. It was dubbed ‘Things can only get wetter’ by many papers in the light of the torrential rain the Prime Minister was subjected to. The Sun Newspaper, never one to pass up an entendre, had the headline ‘Oh Ballots! Just when you were looking forward to a summer of festivals, Wimbledon, the Euro Football Championships along comes Rishi and calls a General Election’.

Six weeks of electioneering – I hope you are all looking forward to it. It will fly past!

Six weeks for the nations to decide who it wants to govern for the next five years.

For Christians I hope we engage open mindedly in who we think we would best shape our country in ways which we believe are more in line with god’s nature and desires for creation and humanity.

Because our ultimate reality is God. Today is Trinity Sunday and it is unique among the Church’s other festivals and observances. Instead of celebrating a person or commemorating an event, Trinity Sunday celebrates God alone. Other days are set aside for pondering God’s deeds of creation and redemption, but Trinity Sunday provides a space in the liturgical calendar to contemplate God’s being and God’s nature: a chance, even, to make our own attempts to describe God.

‘God is love,’ states the writer of John’s first letter. It’s a simple statement, with profound and limitless implications. One of these implications finds its fulfilment in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which presents us with the truth that at the very heart of reality there lies a mutual relationship of unbounded, self-giving love. If this is God, and God is love, then love is reality’s origin, existence and destiny. Any thought or word or action that tends towards love or fosters loving relationships is godly. Anything that tends away from love or fosters hatred is ungodly.

In the light of our understanding of God, then, how should we respond to deciding who should govern? We are taught to believe that it’s *God’s* world, not ours. It’s strange, then, that we tolerate or even take sides in conflicts about who owns which bit. It’s strange that we allow some of the people God creates to be treated well and others badly. It’s strange that we cling to unequal shares of the world’s wealth. It’s strange that we exploit the world rather than cherish it. It’s perhaps strangest of all that the Church has historically been implicated in all these strange things. If God in Christ came to save the world as the Gospel reading states, and if we are the body of Christ as we so often state, then we must think and say and do whatever tends towards saving the world.[[1]](#endnote-1)

 But other people and other faiths have different experiences of God. An increasing number of people in our society have rejected a belief in God.

I read a meme on social media the other day that said

To be an atheist I would have to believe that

Nothing produced everything

Non-life produced life

Randomness produced precision

Chaos produced order

I simply do not have that much faith.

Other people have some innate sense that there must be something behind all we have. That when they have experienced life being born and they hold a baby they marvel at life and the question why is there something and not nothing. Who is behind it all? One guy I know likes climbing mountains and enjoys the awesome views from the top and feels close to the Creator of the universe. He’s not sure who that is but he feels a different perspective on life.

Christians have always pointed to the Bible as a source of God’s self-revelation to us about God’s nature and being. The Bibe in many ways is a series of encounters between God and humanity, and how they have been written down to help us have some bearing and conversation about the mystery of God.

In the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah has a vision of God sitting on a throne in great splendour. An angel cries, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord’. Confronted by the majesty of God, Isaiah feels lost and unworthy. But an angel touches Isaiah’s lips with a purifying hot coal and says that his sin is wiped out. Isaiah then responds to God’s call, ‘Who will go for us?’, saying, ‘Send me!’

If we explore the mystery of knowing God we may not have all the answers about God, but at least we can begin with some questions. Where are we on the journey into God’s mystery, and how might we progress further?

Isaiah had a very specific aspect of God revealed to him. God was seen as high up on a throne, holy and powerful. Isaiah recognised God as someone far removed from his usual experience and was moved to acknowledge God’s glory. The encounter had a profound effect on Isaiah; in contrast to the God he had seen, he saw himself as weak, sinful, guilty. Isaiah experienced the mercy of God and responded with the promise of joyful service. How does our experience of God have an impact on the way we think, worship and behave?

A lot of people are put off by the concept of holiness. We have that expression ‘holier than thou’ it I conjures up images of self-righteousness and judgement and prissy individuals, who you wouldn’t want to invite to a party because they wouldn’t be much fun.

Holiness can be associated with spotlessness. There is no dirt. You go into some peoples homes and it is spotless. Not a layer of dust anywhere. You immediately feel you need to take your shoes off before the owner of the house requests that you do. Its not always relaxing because you have the fear that you might make a mess.

Some parts of the Bible seem to have been written by those obsessed with cleanliness and holiness. No dirt. No sin. No mess.

In the New Testament the appearance of Jesus upended all that obsession with staying clean and holy. Jesus went round deliberately meeting up with dirty sinful people. He touched them and helped them. He wasn’t worried about being tarnished by them or polluted by them. Quite the reverse. His love and grace changed them - not the other way round. They were brought into relationship and belonging by the gracious invitation of Jesus.

Christians believe that in Jesus we saw God in the flesh. This is what God would be like if God was a human being.

That’s a massive claim isn’t it?

We make the claim because of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of his Spirit to change our lives and bring us a sense of his presence and hope.

In the gospel passage we see a priest in Jesus day ask a lot of questions about Jesus.

What does it mean to be born from above? Or who is Jesus really? But it is also helpful to ask about the motives behind the questions, the purpose of the questions. Good teachers encourage children to ask questions – why?

You will hopefully find as Theodore grows up he will grow by asking questions. It might be irritating at times but bear with it.

Faith grows by asking questions.

Jesus leads Nicodemus to focus less on what can be seen, heard or experienced, and more on what is not revealed so easily. Our journey of faith is a gradual revelation about the nature and glory of God. Questions do not necessarily imply that we doubt, but perhaps show that we want to learn more, go deeper.

The words ‘mystery’ and ‘revelation’ are tantalizing. Both imply that something is hidden with more to reveal.

On receiving a letter or parcel, some tear it open to see the contents quickly. Others examine the handwriting and the postmark, sniff it or shake it, feel its thickness or speculate about who sent it or what it contains. And those who use the internet and social media will know about those tempting ‘click to find out more’ invitations that are not always what they seem.

On a journey of faith, some people like to know everything about God all at once, perhaps even believing that that is truly possible (it isn’t). Others are content to discover a little at a time so that there is always more to look forward to.

Isaiah had a direct encounter with God through a vision. The image of a high and holy being had a profound effect on Isaiah. Isaiah perceived that he himself was far from holy, and this distressed him. But he also saw that God was a God of love and mercy. So, he was not left in his state of despair; in fact, it was the exact opposite: he was cleansed, healed and made fit for service. In the Gospel reading, Nicodemus had the privilege of seeing God face-to-face in the person of Jesus. Yet, even this wonderful revelation was not completely satisfying for him. He wanted to know more about who Jesus was, so plied him with questions that Jesus patiently answered. Both Isaiah and Nicodemus had wonderful experiences of God.

While we may not experience a vision like Isaiah’s, and we certainly don’t have the advantage of seeing Jesus face-to-face, thankfully God is still revealed to those who are seeking, who are prepared to ask questions. The clue is in Jesus’ response to Nicodemus, and the answer involves the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes today to give tantalising glimpses of God – in the Scriptures, in our worship, and also in the encounters that we have with each other.

There is a story about a fictional priest called Don Camillo. In conversation with God, he suggests that ideas are like a candle in a room, lighting up the darkness for that person. Ah, says God, you are nearly right, but if more people enter the room with candles, they give more light to those near them, and eventually everything in the room is made plain.

The mystery of God – and in particular, of God as Holy Trinity – is tantalizing, and all is not revealed at once. Yet, God invites us into that mystery, to explore and ask questions. There is always more to discover and look forward to.

 **Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, we pray for all who seek you in the Scriptures, and for all who desire to come closer to you through your Son, Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we journey deeper into our relationships with you. In a world which demands certainty and proof, please help us to share unashamedly the mystery that is you.

**Lord, we live and love in the mystery that is you.**

Lord God, we pray for a world that, despite increasing knowledge, remains so much of a mystery. We haven’t come close to fathoming all the mysteries of the universe; even the deepest seas of our beautiful planet retain secrets we are yet to discover. We pray for all who probe the wonders of inner and outer space, for the scientists who seek certainties and truths; may they never be dismissive of the great mystery which holds it all together, the mystery that is you. May they find ultimate truth in your mystery, O Lord. May we, your children, as seekers in a world of uncertainty, never fail to feel awe and wonder before your mystery.

**Lord, we live and love in the mystery that is you.**

Lord God, the demands of daily life leave little time for understanding mysteries. Many of us lack the time to ponder the little mysteries of life, let alone the spiritual dimension; and so we pray for all who are living quietly and decently, trying to do their best. We pray especially for those known to us who light up our own small corner – those who make our communities better places to live by their actions and attitudes.

**Lord, we live and love in the mystery that is you.**

Lord God, we pray for all who struggle to find meaning in the sufferings of loss and grief, or of serious illness - physical or mental. We pray especially at this time for those whose lives have been blighted by infected blood, and for all caught up in the awful conflicts around the world. Lord, your mystery is infused with love; it is the mystery of light in the darkness, of meaning and hope found in deepest despair, of new purpose when all seemed lost. It is the mystery of survival, of resilience and ultimately of Resurrection. Lord, may those in need today be surprised by the touch of your mystery.

**Lord, we live and love in the mystery that is you.**

**Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

*Leader:* We thank you God for showing yourself to us.
*Then invite individuals to say:*
Thank you, that you are…*[a word from the worship activity]*
*Leader:* We thank you that you are Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
and you are with us today.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

We praise you, God the Father,
life-giver and creator of all.
We praise you, God the Son,
Jesus Christ, our Lord.
We praise you, God the Holy Spirit,
guide and friend.
Surround us in your mystery,
and be with us this coming week.
**Amen.**

1. *Robert Beard is a freelance writer, NHS worker and Church of England priest.* <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2024/131-may-june-2024-b/trinity-sunday/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)