

# Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Trinity Sunday 2010

By Chris Palmer

30 May 2010

Six months ago today, at exactly this moment, 10am, I was being interviewed for this job. It's felt like a long wait for me, and I'm sure it has for you too having 'carelessly lost' all your clergy – as the archdeacon put it on Wednesday evening. But I want to say just how very, very good it is to be here. And to say a big thank you for the welcome you've given – for the goodies you gave us when we moved into our home – and for the wonderful welcome on Wednesday night at my institution.

And it's good to be starting on Trinity Sunday – and at our patronal festival. Other churches have mere saints for their patrons; but the founders of this church decided that only God himself was good enough for here – God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I read the readings for today about ten days ago –and that's quite a long way in advance for me – I was struck by this phrase: 'he will not speak on his own'. Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears ...' ‘

If you think about it for a moment it's a quite astonishing thing to say about God – for the Holy Spirit is God. He does not say his own thing, but submits himself to listen to another – to the Father, to the Son maybe – and to say what they are saying. We imagine that the pinnacle of intellectual achievement is having our own thoughts, original individual thinking. Saying what someone else said is deficient. But we're wrong. There is no deficiency in God, and the Holy Spirit 'does not speak on his own.'

And if it is true of the Spirit, it's true of God the Son and God the Father too. Jesus, the word of God, is bent to the will of the Father, to the movement of the Spirit. God the Father is entirely surrendered in love to the word and spirit. Within the life of God there is no 'on his own' – there is only mutuality, being together.

And it shocks us, because, for all that we talk about the importance of collaboration and teamwork, our culture actually values independent actions, the person who is resourceful enough to get the job done on their own. And quite often we want the power of working alone. Witness the dire warnings that we heard from some politicians about the dangers of hung parliaments and coalition governments before the election. They would have preferred the neatness, the decisiveness, the tidiness of not having to co-operate.

I remember being the same at school. When I was about twelve in science we had to work in pairs at experiments. I disliked this intensely, I much more trusted me to get it right than us. So much so that the teacher commented on this to my parents at parents' evening. That's about trust. Not going it alone is also about being attentive to each other. A married couple once told me that they'd discuss what to do when they went out together. One would want to go to the cinema and the other didn't; the other wanted to go to a concert, and the first one didn't; in the end they always compromised and went for a meal. Until they realised that neither was getting what they really wanted. And they started to go sometimes to concerts, sometimes to the cinema, sometimes for meals. Community is not about finding the lowest common denominator; it is about each bending to know and fulfil the will of the other.

One of the things people most often take a lone approach to is faith. My favourite example of individualism in the bible is Doubting Thomas. You remember the story don't you? It's the first Easter Day. The other disciples are gathered together, and

Jesus appears among them and they see him and believe in him. And Thomas was absent, and just listen to what he says when they tell him: 'Unless I see the mark of the nails... and put my finger in the mark of nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' Can you hear all the 'I's and 'me's in that. Unlike the Holy Spirit, Thomas wants to 'speak on his own'; he will not listen to the faith, to the experience of the community.

To be a Christian is to listen to the experience, to the faith of a community of believers, to submit not to 'speak on our own.' That is why in the Creed we say 'We believe in one God.' The old prayer book creed started 'I believe on one God' and some people think 'We believe' is a modern change. But it's not. Originally the Nicene Creed started with the Greek word 'We believe'; when they translated it into Latin they made it 'I believe' and that's how it got in the Prayer Book. 'We believe'... this is the faith of the church... I do not speak on my own – we speak together.

If Thomas is the ultimate individualist, then God is the ultimate collaborator. His action is always one of co-operation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acting in concert. Have you ever notice that when God created human beings, he talks of himself in the plural. 'Let us make humankind in our own image...' That's quite remarkable, for an Old Testament text – long before talk about God the Trinity was around. Christians have tended to see in that a reference to the Trinity. Of course, they're not silly enough to think that's what the author meant, but texts don't only mean what the author meant, but gain meaning and significance within community. So – like with the icon – we can see the Trinity – God in concert – in the Old Testament too.

And God in concert, made us in his image – to work together, to be attentive to each other. As with God, submitting to listen each other's voices, bending ourselves to know each others' wills, surrendering ourselves in love to each others' interests.

This church has made a significant bold move of working in concert by becoming part of the Merton Priory Team Ministry, with St John's and Christ Church. I think that is to be hugely applauded. When I was interviewed for this job I was asked something like 'What's the value or benefit of Team Ministry?' and I still remember what I said. I said 'It's not only about reaping the benefits of co-operation' - you know running one confirmation class rather than three - 'No, the real thing about a team is learning to be accountable to one another.' So at Holy Trinity we bend ourselves to know and honour the wisdom of Christ Church and St John's too.

My role as Team Rector of Merton Priory is a team role. I don't represent just Holy Trinity at team meetings; I represent the team. There's probably no one else for whom that has to be true – the wardens, for example, do represent their own church. But I'm already finding people who have got the whole team at heart, so I won't have to 'speak on my own' for the team – and I look forward to finding more as time goes on. One consequence of me being a team person is that Holy Trinity will have to enjoy sharing me with Christ Church and St John's – and more so until there's a Team Vicar there. But that will enrich my perspective and I hope yours also.

A final thought: in the Suffolk village church of Long Melford there's a picture of Trinity in one of their windows. It's a picture of three rabbits. They've each got two ears, but between them they've only got three ears. I've stuck a picture of it up over on the notice board and a modern representation of it too; you can look at it afterwards. What better way can you think of to say that community, that Trinity, is about hearing together. 'He will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears.'