

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Trinity Sunday



27 May 2018

Isaiah 6: 12-17

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

If you ever doubted God's sense of humor for a moment you only had to watch Presiding Bishop Michael Curry in his sermon at the Royal Wedding, asking the assembled ranks of the British and American establishment to put their hands up if they got there by car or automobile! The British and American aristocracy these days are, of course, less landed gentry and more Elton John and David Beckham on the one side and Oprah Winfrey and George Clooney on the other! In the slightly embarrassed silence that followed, almost no one put their hand up, but I don't think we can deduce from that meant they all got there on the number 29 Bus from the Edgware Road Tube station.

I liked the comment by the journalist who, while watching the sermon, tweeted, "The preacher is doing 50 miles per hour in a 30 miles per hour zone, and it's fantastic!" And it was fantastic to see Britain and America, and African America, brought together in that historic moment.

And on this Memorial Day Weekend we are reminded of how the bond, represented in the marriage the other week was, in fact, pledged long ago on the battlefields of Europe, and in conflicts since, in the blood of those American, African American, and British personnel who laid down their lives together in the cause of freedom.

This year we are particularly conscious of the 100th Anniversary of the end of the First World War on November 11, 1918. As most of you know, I was a British Army Chaplain for 21 years before I came here. Those shiny mounted soldiers of the Household Cavalry we saw escorting the couple's carriage at the Royal Wedding, brought back memories for me from the time when, for a while, I was their chaplain. The First World War calls to my mind the many acts of remembrance I have attended, and particularly the words and ministry of the World War I British Army Chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy who's battered stole I still own and who is still the model and inspiration for British Army Chaplaincy even today.

This Trinity Sunday, as we consider the deep mystery of the nature of God as Trinity, it is always worth recognizing that the doctrine of the Trinity is as much an observation as it is a definition. All those marvelous analogies we use to try to understand how God is both three and one are great: The three leaf clover with its three leaves on one plant; The triune nature of water with its three states of ice, water and steam; The image of the man who is three things uncle, father, and son at the same time. All of these imperfectly open us to some sense of the mystery, but fundamentally we know that God is beyond definition.

The Men's Group started a discussion about science and religion last Thursday night. We were reflecting on how the great advances in science today are revealing, not greater and greater certainty, but rather a deeper and deeper realization of how mysterious our universe is. An example of this is that universally common thing we call gravity. Isaac Newton observed, after the apple fell on his head, that larger bodies

attract smaller ones, but our greatest minds today still cannot say quite why or how this is the case. As one American astrophysicist, Brian Koberlein said, "We often speak of gravity as a force. More accurately it is a feature of space-time. Even more accurately, we don't know what it is."

We observe and we learn, but the more we learn the more we realize how much more we do not know. That is because we can only see what we can see from where we stand. We observe the bits that affect us and that we can perceive, but not, of course, anything of the bits we can't see or detect in any way.

God is like that. The Trinity is what we can see ~ what we experience. We experience the Father as the creator and origin of the universe. He is the presence we sense behind the stars, the oceans, and the mountains. The presence behind the colors and scents and infinite detail of living things. We experience the Son, Jesus, through his words and life as described in the Bible, and through his presence in the Sacrament. We experience the Holy Spirit as the intimate awareness in which we sense God's presence in our prayers, and in the action of God all around us. The Trinity is how we experience God ~ God towards us ~ and we experience only a part, not the whole.

Bishop Curry's sermon at the Royal Wedding focused on the redemptive power of love. "We must discover love," he said, "the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world, a new world." Love, like gravity, is on the one hand blindingly simple. As the Bishop implied, if only everyone loved each other, the world would be a much better place. Yet, like gravity, we struggle to see just what it is and how that can be.

What we do know is that we human beings are capable of both great hatred and great love. We see the hatred in the conflicts, terrorism, crime, and the clashes of political ideology all around us. We can see the genuine love that can exist between two people as they come to God to join their lives together at his altar. This weekend, we also reflect on the tremendous human capacity for love and self-sacrifice that we remember in those who gave their lives for their country in those dark and violent places of human experience we call war and armed conflict.

For me, the great proof of the faith and the Trinity lies not in elegant theology or even in the great and hopeful theme of love and its power to change us. The acid test, for me, is that this faith stands where nothing else can stand. It remains intact in the face of those darkest corners of human experience— on those fields of blood and rain that we remember this weekend. It is the God who meets us there as well as in fine palaces and joyful wedding feasts: The God that is truly towards us.

I hope you will indulge me if I close on this Memorial Day Weekend with a poem by that First World War Army Chaplain I mentioned, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (or "Woodbine Willie" as the soldiers called him because he gave out Woodbine Cigarettes while he lived and ministered beside them in the front line of the trenches). It is called "A Soldier For His Mate." For me, it gives a tremendous sense of this faith that is possible where nothing else is possible.

There's a broken, battered village
Somewhere up behind the line;
There's a dugout and a bunk there
That I used to say were mine.

I remember how I reached them.
Dripping wet and all forlorn,

In the dim and dreary twilight
Of a weeping summer dawn.

All that week I'd buried brothers
In one bitter battle slain;
In one grave I laid two hundred,
God, what sorrow and what pain!

And that night I'd been in trenches,
Seeking out the sodden dead,
And just dropping them in shell holes,
With a service swiftly said.

For the bullets rattled 'round me,
But I couldn't leave them there,
Water-soaked in flooded shell holes.
Rift of common Christian prayer.

So I crawled 'round on my knees,
And I listened to the roar
Of the guns that hammered Ypres,
Like big breakers on the shore.

Then there spoke a dripping sergeant,
When the time was growing late:
"Would you please to bury this one,
Cause he used to be my mate?"

So we groped our way in darkness
To a body lying there,
Just a blacker lump of blackness,
With a red blotch on his hair.

Though we turned him gently over,
Yet I still can hear the thud,
As the body fell face forward
And then settled in the mud.

We went down upon our faces,
And I said the service through,
From "I am the Resurrection"
To the last, the great "Adieu."

We stood up to give the blessings
And commend him to the Lord,
When a sudden light shot soaring,
Silver swift and like a sword.

At a stroke it slew the darkness,
Flashed its glory on the mud,
And I saw the sergeant staring
At a crimson clot of blood.

There are many kinds of sorrow
In this world of Love and Hate,
But there is no sterner sorrow
Than a soldier's for his mate.

By G.A. Studdert Kennedy
[The Battle of Thiepval Ridge, Sept. 26-28 1916](#)

This world of love and hate need God the Father who created all that is and sustains it with his love. God the Son who hung upon the cross to save us all and God the Holy Spirit in whom we know God's living presence in our midst.



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