

TRINITY SUNDAY – 30 MAY 2021 – Romans 8.12-17, John 3.1-17

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Trinity Sunday is a Sunday for relationships. Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a God of relationships. It was very special last week seeing Harry and Sarah again after so long, and sharing real hugs. My daughter-in-law is an excellent cook, so last Sunday evening and a roast dinner was very nice, and Harry took a couple of days off work and came out with us. As those of you who follow me on facebook know, we found very minor roads in the depths of Northumberland and Harry was on gate opening and sheep herding duties. He did question why he had a father like me! We stopped in Yorkshire on the way home and went to the pub with Hannah and new boyfriend John. “Dad, I paid a deposit of £40 when I booked, can you pay the rest?” I went to the Bar to pay, and the landlady says “no, we haven’t taken a deposit, just authority to take money if you didn’t turn up.” So I end up paying for the whole of lunch. Kids!



One of the lovely things about this job is being part of relationships. Yesterday Matt and Fliss came to renew their vows on their 10th wedding anniversary, and son Jacob came too. Just the three of them, but how special to be part of it. Even if, after just ten years, they are only newly-weds. I pointed that in the next decade they have the teenage Jacob to cope with – which will test any marriage!



There are occasions when relationships are difficult – and after 25 years of doing this job I have learned how it is to walk on egg shells. I remember one funeral where the deceased was on his third wife, who was younger than his daughter. It was a big Cathedral do – and you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. The Dean looked after the widow, the Canon Precentor looked after the daughter, and I looked after the deceased. I had the easiest job – he was the one who wasn't arguing.

I commented last week about the importance of relationships in churches, and said that “My church family, families, in so many different places, and men and women who have challenged me, sustained me, delivered casseroles to the door when I was grieving and incapable of looking after myself, let me share in their joys and sorrows, given me friendships that are so deep, and made my life what it is. I am so blessed”. I meant it.



I had an email the other day telling me that Ida had died. She had been Cathedral Secretary in the days when the place was run by three people, and was still a force of nature in my day. Her husband Dale was a joy as well – a really special couple. Dale's brother Brian was a talented artist, and had served in the SOE during the War. He had been captured by the Gestapo and spent time in concentration camps. He survived because he was an artist – he drew portraits of the guards and their families, so they let him live. Every year when we commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day, Dale would be standing there in tears remembering his brother – it was a privilege to stand with him. May they both rest in peace and rise in glory.



'Christ Instructing Nicodemus' by Crijn Hendricksz, 1604

I'd like to think that Nicodemus the pharisee was the sort of person who also enjoyed his relationships.

Pharisee is one of those titles we use, and we all assume we know what it means. There were about 6,000 pharisees at this time, all men, religious leaders, the group whose job it was to interpret and explain the Law, and make sure the Law was upheld. Israel was a religious state, based on the Torah, the law of Moses – not just the 10 Commandments that underlay it all, but all the laws that had built up from that. Many of them are in our old Testament, but they went deeper than that. It's all about relationships – relationships between people, and the relationship between the people and God. What is right, what is wrong, how do you live together, how do you cope when there doesn't seem to be a straightforward choice, how do you move on together. These were men who, no doubt like all religious men, had a variety of motives. That desire to do God's will, and for some that would have been clear, others would have struggled with what it meant – that desire to keep society functioning, flowing, keep people in a good place – and for some it would have been power and authority for wrong reasons, that desire to control. It doesn't matter whether you are a religious leader, or a politician, or a special advisor, power can easily be corrupted.

Presumably, like clergy today, Pharisees got together and talked. And they would have talked about Jesus, this religious leader, this religious leader who was being followed by huge numbers of people. He would have been a threat – after all, if they are out on the hillside listening to Jesus, then they are not in the synagogue listening to them. But threat or not, the question was – is he of God?



It is a discussion I have often had in ecumenical meetings when we stop worrying about the decline of the old, traditional religious movements, and start talking about new religious movements, new churches. When I was last really involved in ecumenical matters, back in 1990, there were 19 different churches represented on Churches Together in England. Churches like the Catholics, Anglicans, Methodist, Baptist, URC, Salvation Army, Quakers – the most radical were the New Testament Assemblies of God, what we used to call a black-led church, certainly nothing we had in Cambridgeshire. Now there are 51 churches represented on Churches Together – many of whom I have never heard of. We used to call them “house churches”, but over the last few years many of them have grown and developed, and are huge. Hundreds of people, worshipping in warehouses, schools, up and down our country – and many smaller groups too. Over the last years they have moved on line – there are thousands of Christians in this country worshipping on line today.

That is great, but it raises all sorts of interesting questions. As well as 51 national churches, there are also many smaller churches, often led by one or two charismatic individuals, and these groups can come and go very easily. The question for the more-established churches is how do we find them, how do we relate to them, should we relate to them? What do we believe, are they a church worshipping God, serving Jesus Christ, working in the power of the Holy Spirit? They may be the basic questions, but if I believe in an inclusive church, a church where the ministry of men and women is valued, can I, should I, be supporting churches where so often women play a very secondary role because of a literal interpretation of Scripture? And that’s before we start asking questions about human sexuality. Since we’re in the 21st century, there are also questions about money and safeguarding. Is a new organisation keeping proper accounts, or is a church leader profiting from the giving of his congregation – it happens, we know. Is a new church as careful as they ought to be about how they safeguard children and vulnerable adults – we may moan about the rules in our church context, but those rules are there to keep people safe. Any charismatic leader, any man (usually a man) with power, can very easily be seduced to use that power wrongly – the power of evil can attack all churches, old and new.

*Stained glass window, Nicodemus coming to Jesus
Ruthwell Church, Dumfries and Galloway*



You can imagine all these questions being asked by the Pharisees about Jesus. Who's funding him, where's the money coming from? You can imagine questions being asked about Judas, the one who apparently handled the money. You can imagine questions being asked about some of the women that Jesus associates with? Rude comments being made about Mary Magdalene and the sort of woman she was supposed to be. I can imagine some of the Pharisees wanted nothing to do with Jesus – and I can understand why.

But Nicodemus is more open. He goes. He goes quietly, under cover of night – he goes because he needs to find out more. He goes, because he knows that Jesus “is a teacher who has come from God”. He is certain – and because of that certainty he is prepared to take a risk.

Jesus talks to him about a power from above, about the need to receive from above. This faith of ours is not dependent on human relationships, it is not dependent on the word of God, not dependent on centuries of tradition, but this relationship of ours is dependent on a relationship with God, with Jesus Christ.

Jesus talks about being born again – and we know about birth, many of you have given birth, many of us have been there. Birth is pain and struggle, and the delight and joy of new life.



Ralph's baptism 4 October 2020 - mattoakley.co.uk

I have spent the last few days making contact with those who had baptisms booked during the last year – in the hope that, once we get back from Orkney, we'll be able to start baptising again. (And we will need people willing to give

up an hour on a Sunday afternoon to come and welcome and support them). In a baptism we have plenty of spirit imagery, and we also have the image of the cross –

Christ claims you for his own.
Receive the sign of his cross.
Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ
against sin, the world and the devil,
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.

It is always a struggle balancing the love and the welcome, with the commitment and the cross, and what it means to be a Christian. But I'm not going to be too hard on baptism families – because, if we're being honest, all of us, even those of us who have been part of church for decades, we struggle with commitment and what it means to be a Christian.



Jesus is taken down the cross
Stations of the Cross by Jonathan Clark
Southwell Minster

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” – and if God loves us so much, I have to believe that love is the answer. When you love, you get hurt. When you love, you make mistakes. When you love, you will hurt – because we are only human. But love conquers all, love is eternal.

A couple of years later, Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea as they took Jesus' body off the cross, and prepared it for burial. That's the price of love, so we thank God for a man willing to be challenged in his faith, an example to all of us. Amen.