***Reflection for Trinity Sunday 2020***

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Matthew 28:16-20

7th June 2020 Mornington & Glenaven

Oh it’s that day again!

Trinity Sunday can be something of a short straw, it is full of pitfalls, it challenges us to theological precision and the careful choice of words. There is a story preachers scare ourselves with on this day of the village athiest who only goes to church on Trinity Sunday to enjoy the sight of preacher’s squirming.

Well if you are here, good morning!

Trinity Sunday is a challenge then, and not just about getting our theology right. In this congregation we pride ourselves on our good interfaith relations, on our appreciative awareness of other faiths yet today we proclaim a doctrine which radically separates us from the other Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Islam, both of whom proclaim the absolute oneness of God. Today is the day of our awkward differentness.

Also this is the one day when we as Methodists celebrate a doctrine, a formal belief that is to be assented to.

Today isn’t rooted in an event in the life and death of Jesus or in the Church. Today is about an idea, an idea I might say you will find little support for in Scripture.

Also it is a day for trotting out tired allegories. You know the kind of thing, how God can be like water, which can be a solid, a liquid and a vapour, or like an egg with shell, yolk and white, or even a coconut with husk, flesh and milk. Actually on theological grounds none of those allegories work but we have all heard them or even used them.

What are we to make of it all? I’d like to try and begin that task this morning, as I often do, with a little poetry.

*‘O my Luve is like a red, red rose   That’s newly sprung in June;  O my Luve is like the melody   That’s sweetly played in tune.*

 So begins one the poem *A Red, Red, Rose* by Robert Burns.

 Now poetic language is not to be taken literally, we get into terrible trouble if we do. Now *just imagine if your love was like a red, red rose. Just suppose the object of affection was really* like a red red rose. On the positive side she or he would smell nice , though greenfly might be a problem. But a rose has a disproportionately large head and is very prickly.

Oh heaven’s, I think I have dated a rose or two in the past!

Or if you prefer an English poet try this from a sonnet by William Shakespeare

*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*

 Is your beloved always temperate? Perhaps not! In the services I put together week by week I use poetry fairly often. I do so because poetry is a way of speaking truth without prescribing truth. It is a way of hinting and alluding to truths that defy prescription and pinning down.

Our language of Faith, out talk of god is just this, hints, allusions, metaphors. Trying to find the words is , in the words of Val Webb, “*like catching water in a net*.”

Why am I saying this all this on Trinity Sunday?

Because today of all days it needs to be said, because today of all days we are confronted with the truth that the truths of faith are, as the philosopher Wittgenstein said, poetic in nature. Our faith statements are a construction of words to draw one towards meaning. They are signs we must not mistake for the destination.

Furthermore Scripture begins and ends with poetry and contains swaths and snatches of it throughout its vast remainder. The rites of Christian worship across the centuries have endured in part because they are poetry in the mouth, poetry in the ear, poetry to live by.

And today we sorely need to keep that in mind.

Today in many a pulpit poetry will be forgotten.

Many years ago now as a lay preacher I offered my first Trinity Sunday sermon, I don’t have it on file, I’d probably cringe if I read it now but even then I hinted at eh inadequacy of language and the problems of literalism.

Afterwards a lay preacher said to me the Trinity had always seemed perfectly obvious and he couldn’t have understood why people struggled over it.

Well it is far from obvious, and it did not become the settled view of Christians for centuries. The language the doctrine is couched in has become foreign to us, we do not know what it means and need to translate it.

Think of the word person, we talk today don’t we of one God in three persons but what is a person? To us a person is you, or you, or you. A distinct autonomous being, a free agent, whole in her or himself.

But the language of person in the doctrine of the Trinity refers to persona, the mask worn by an actor in classical theatre. That has quite different meaning, after all a mask is simply an appearance of a thing to be put on or put off.

It all get as a bit confusing doesn’t it, no wonder so many of us blunder into one heresy or another today.

I won’t give you a blow by blow account of how the doctrine was developed, it took some five centuries to get there. People killed each other over it, there were street fights in Constantinople over it.

But what the formation of doctrine shows us is that whatever the words we use, the formulae we construct there we rely on words and metaphors drawn from our humanity to talk about the Sacred.

There is no special language come down from heaven in which we might talk about God. There is no holy grammar on which we might correctly frame our theology. No, we have the language of lived experience, of our very humanity to draw on. Words which cannot define the Sacred but can point to, allude to, hint at it. That means the doing of Theology starts with this, reflection on our daily lives, asking ourselves what it is to be human, what it is to love, to be present and to will the good. And that presents us with a challenge; because whose humanity is talked about? Whose experience is drawn on?

In as much as our God talk is often Alpha male language, Lord, King, there you have an answer. Our language of the Sacred needs to draw on the experience and lives of women as well as men, of the poor and dispossessed as well as the strong and powerful, of Black and indigenous peoples as well as those of European descent. The more we reflect upon the fullness of human experience the richer and more true will be our Sacred language.

And sometimes human experience is challenging, difficult to look at yet we must do so unflinchingly.

I won’t go much further with that now but I have started my next Connections article with asking where was God when George Floyd was choked to death by a police officer in Minneapolis. God was in the dying black man who pleaded, begged, called out for his mother and whose last words were “I can’t breathe.”

God was in him and in his suffering and dying, God is in our reaction, in the widespread grief and outrage, in the challenge to endemic racism. God is in that snap in so many people around the world and in our cries of “enough.”

The Trinity is not the last word, it is the beginning of wisdom not its ending, let us ponder these things in our hearts and add new words, new stories to our telling of God Amen