

# Sermon for King's College Chapel, Trinity Sunday

## 3 June 2012

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**Chaplain**

It's curious, but after I got ordained, several people offered advice in the form of a veiled warning; never, they helpfully opined, if you can possibly avoid it, preach on Trinity Sunday. Everything that can be written or said about it has been written and said, and don't even think that you can begin successfully to explain the concept of the Trinity.

However, fortunately, this year Trinity Sunday runs the risk of paling into comparative insignificance, being outshone by the brilliance of the Diamond Jubilee. About three weeks ago a dozen of us were given a guided tour of the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. For once, not having to trudge past these astonishing bits of *über-bling* at the normal speed demanded of the common-or-garden tourist, I was able to stop and study the contents of the glass cabinets, and I know now that, *pace* Marilyn Monroe, it is possible to have a surfeit of diamonds. Compared to this display of crushing opulence, the vision of the throne beheld by St John the Divine in the book of Revelation with all its accompanying crystals and emeralds, jasper and rainbows, runs the risk of appearing rather shabby.

Having said that, it's clear that this vision is meant to represent everything that is triumphant, that is magnificent, that is desirable. But how do you ever describe the indescribable? St John is pulling out all available stops to express the utter, incomprehensible vastness of the vision. There is the trumpet that summons him to 'Come up hither' – of course it's a trumpet; it wouldn't be a viola, would it? There is this spectacular throne, with crowned elders seated, burning lamps, flashes of lightning and crashings of thunder. Every sense is assailed. Beasts representing the four Evangelists whose existence is focussed on praise and worship surround the throne, echoing the seraphs experienced by Isaiah in his vision of a similar throne. 'Holy, Holy, Holy' is the song, the peon of praise.

The writer is gifted with an extra sense of perception. He is elevated into a spiritual realm which gives him a greater understanding. With this heightened clarity of vision, St John makes every effort to paint a picture of surpassing wonder and beauty, but how do you paint God? How do you explain the inexplicable in terms so

that people say 'Oh, of course, now I understand.' Even someone with the musical imagination of Elgar, when confronted with having to compose the music for Gerontius' encounter with God face to face is reduced to a second of total silence. But it's a second that lasts an eternity and is followed by surging music of massive power and abandonment.

The important thing about this vision, like Isaiah's earlier one, is that the enthroned image of God remains the central core of the spectacle. 'O God, creation's secret force, yourself unmoved, all motions' source'. Everything else, seraphs, glassy sea, attendant elders, burning lamps are arranged in swirling concentric circles. Very interplanetary, very post-modern. By way of contrast, much of the reason for the Queen's enduring popularity, and I'm not speaking as a besotted monarchist, is her desire not to stay holed up in one of the palaces, as the last monarch to celebrate a diamond jubilee was accustomed to do, but to go walk-about, to be seen to be among her people. You could argue that that's what she's paid to do, and of course, that's true, but most people of her age have long since retired and are drawing their pension, or what remains of it. And the point that is underlined by the four and twenty elders whose sole role is not one of courtly sycophancy, but the endless adoration and worship of God is that God is eternal – unlike our own royal family, the question of succession does not here arise. 'Lord God Almighty, which was and is and is to come'.

This concept of heaven as a place of eternity and of light is something that Jesus addresses in his conversation with Nicodemus. Initially they're speaking on different levels. For a start Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night – two obvious reasons why this should be so. As a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee, an open visit to this contentious teacher/healer might have aroused suspicion, if not downright animosity among his fellow-Pharisees. The evangelist is at pains to point out that he represents people of inadequate, incomplete faith. Jesus' concept of rebirth makes no sense to him. He understands only the concept of natural birth of a Jewish mother, whereas Jesus is talking of the whole, infinitely greater idea of being reborn in the spirit. 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' Jesus doesn't begin to try to describe the majesty, the vastness of God in the way that the visionary writer of the Revelation does. It's like the wind, he explains; you can't see it, or understand fully where it comes from, but you know that it's there, because you can see the results of its work. And, trusting in that, the one who believes on Jesus himself as the son of God, will not perish, but have everlasting life.

It's true that Nicodemus is on the right tracks, for he recognizes at least in part the authority of Jesus. 'We know that thou art a teacher come from God', but then he fails to make the connection of what it means to be simply alive and what it means to be alive in the Spirit. It is scarcely a week since we celebrated Whitsun, the coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit, that element of the Trinity described by Jesus as the Comforter. I understand that in the United States a comforter is what we'd call a duvet, something to keep you cosy and warm. I'm not convinced that it's the primary role of the Holy Spirit to do solely that. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is come upon us to challenge, to broaden our horizons, if we will only allow it, and at times, certainly, to sustain and nourish – comfort, even. To benefit fully from the gifts of the Comforter, it will mean, perhaps, allowing ourselves to let go of things with which we are comfortable, and opening ourselves to the challenges of what Richard Coles referred to as the 'unimaginably wide horizons of God's new creation.' Which, it seems to me, is what the writer of Revelation was endeavouring to do.

None of this, I readily admit, comes close to explaining the complexity of the Trinity. But here's an image that might help to clarify it, for which I'm greatly indebted to the decani Choristers. The Trinity is like the three stumps on a cricket pitch. To the bowler, they appear as three; to the person fielding at square leg, level with the stumps, but directly to the side, they appear as only one. It all depends on which way you look at them. Easy, really. Now if St John the Divine had been tasked with clarifying the rules of cricket instead of the Trinity, his book would have been a great deal longer. The image of the four and twenty elders casting down their golden crowns and yelling 'Not out!' has infinite appeal. May we be blessed with the love, the compassion and the challenges of the Holy and Blessed Trinity.

Amen.