

## Sermon Archive 156

Sunday 11 June, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



KNOX CHURCH

love faith outreach community justice

*For Trinity Sunday our Director of Music offered a number of movements from Antonio Vivaldi's "Gloria RV 589", a musical setting of the liturgical text "Glory to God in the highest". I took this as an opportunity to set aside the regular format of a sermon and present a series of readings, reflections and anthems praising the persons of the Trinity.*

-ooOoo-

**The First Lesson:** Isaiah 6: 1-5

**Reflection:** The indescribable One

The student of theology is finding that eternity won't fit into his head. It's not a bad head as heads go, but it's definitely not coping today with *infinity*. Here's the thing: human beings could be described as loving, but God is infinitely loving. Human beings could be described as good, but God is infinitely good. Human beings could be described as powerful, but God is infinitely powerful. This has been his accepted way of describing God. Take a human virtue, multiply it and attribute the product to God. His old professor of the Philosophy of Religion, a few years back, used to call it the OMNI-GOD, the God of hyperbole, the magnificent, self-exaggerating, virtue-expanded God of sweeping scale - the perfect counter to J.B. Phillips's criticism "your God is too small".

But today, some wretched professor theology has upset the OMNI-GOD with some questions. How much more loving is God than humanity? Twice as much? How much more good is God than humanity? Four times as much? How much more powerful is God than humanity? Seventy times seventy perhaps? These naïvely mathematical questions are revealing that God isn't really about quantity. What is twice as loving? What is four times as good? God is infinitely loving, infinitely good - and as soon as it's about infinity, it's obviously no longer about quantity; it's about quality - infinite qualitative difference.

The student of theology begins to think this through. If something is infinitely qualitatively different from something else, then actually it's nothing like that something else at all. It's infinitely qualitatively different. Under amplification by infinity, the comparison loses any meaning. And if this is true, then we can't really

Speak about God at all. Our description of God by comparison becomes meaningless babble.

After the class, the student puts this observation to the professor. The professor says "By George, I think you've got it. That's exactly the point!"

How could that be the point? That speech about God is meaningless? That we have no way of describing God, that God is ineffable? That our words only find meaning as they wait upon *the* Word to be spoken for us? That our poor, stretched language only finds meaning as God opens up, reveals the infinite mystery of God's own self for us to echo.

Isaiah goes to the temple, where the reverently proportioned house is dwarfed by the scale of the vision. It's as if only the hem of God's garment will fit into his world - quantity speaks of quality. It moves him to say "woe is me". He's a man of unclean lips, among people of unclean lips. His lips are not equipped for the task of speaking about this God. Only the seraphim can speak - and they say "holy, holy, holy", which a Christchurch congregation echoes in song thousands of years much later.

The mystery. The other. The holy. That about which our speech only gestures.

Giving glory to God. We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you.

Laudamus te.

**Anthem:** "Laudamus te", Vivaldi  
*We praise, bless, adore, and glorify you*

**The Second Lesson:** 2 Corinthians 5: 17-19

**Reflection:** A language redeemed

To Isaiah's people, to the stammering ones who could not speak of God, came a carpenter from Nazareth. For the better part, he didn't talk about God. He used stories to describe the coming close of God's reign. And maybe there was something in the telling that sort of made it come true - or truer than before. From fishermen and tax collectors, from cynics and true believers, from the careful and the effusive, he made a community. What's it like when God's reign comes close? "Give us a bit more time to think that through, to live it out" say the people who have become a family. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to heaven, and people to one another. Are our words up to describing the mystery of God? Perhaps progressively more so they are, when we learn to say things like "forgive me", "I am sorry", "neither do I condemn you", "you are forgiven and you are free".

As the work of the carpenter is done, our language and lives open up, become more articulate in Spirit, more expressive of the ineffable God.

Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father. Giving glory to God.

Domine Deus, Agnus Dei.

**Anthem:**     “Domine Deus, Agnus Dei”,  
                  *O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty.*  
                  *O Lord the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ!*  
                  *O Lord God, Lamb of God, Lamb of God,*  
                  *Son of the Father.*  
                  *O Lord God, heavenly King.*

**A Responsive Reading:** Song to the Holy Spirit

Lord, Holy Spirit, you blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks,  
**INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE FENCES,**  
**YOU BLOW WHERE YOU WISH TO BLOW.**

Lord, Holy Spirit, you are the sun who shines on the little plant,  
**YOU WARM HIM GENTLY, YOU GIVE HIM LIFE,**  
**YOU RAISE HIM UP TO BECOME A TREE WITH MANY LEAVES.**

Lord, Holy Spirit, you are the mother eagle with her young,  
**HOLDING THEM IN PEACE UNDER YOUR FEATHERS.**

On the highest mountain you have built your nest,  
**ABOVE THE VALLEY, ABOVE THE STORMS OF THE WORLD,**  
**WHERE NO HUNTER EVER COMES.**

Lord, Holy Spirit, you are the bright cloud in whom we hide,  
in whom we know already that the battle has been won.  
**YOU BRING US TO OUR BROTHER JESUS**  
**TO REST OUR HEADS UPON HIS SHOULDER.**

Lord, Holy Spirit, you are the kind fire who does not cease to burn,  
**CONSUMING US WITH FLAMES OF LOVE AND PEACE,**  
**DRIVING US OUT LIKE SPARKS**  
**TO SET THE WORLD ON FIRE.**

Lord, Holy Spirit,  
in the love of friends you are building a new house,

**HEAVEN IS WITH US WHEN YOU ARE WITH US.**

You are singing your songs in the hearts of the poor.

**GUIDE US, WOUND US, HEAL US.**

**BRING US TO THE FATHER.**

*James K Baxter (1926-1972)*

**Reflection:** When the Spirit comes . . .

- When a wind blows in unexpected places, and creation moves like a dancing sea of wheat,
- when a plant is warmed by the sun and becomes a tree with many leaves,
- when little ones are held in peace within the feathers of a mother's love,
- when within a bright cloud of comfort the heart is reassured that the battle has been won,
- when people flicker forth like little sparks to set the world on fire with love and peace,
- when a house is built for people to live in and One at the door says "welcome friend",
- when songs are sung in the hearts of the poor,
- when we are guided, wounded, healed,

then the Spirit is bringing us to the mystery of the Father, through the Son.

- When the Advocate advocates, when the Comforter comforts,
- when the Spirit proves again that we are never orphaned,
- when the Giver gives gifts for the peace of the people,

then our language finds footing; we speak of God, and truth is expressed.

With the Holy Spirit, giving glory to God.

Cum Sancto Spiritu

**Anthem:** "Cum Sancto Spiritu", Vivaldi  
*With the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father*

**The Last Lesson:** Psalm 150

**Hymn:** Glory be to God, creator, glory be to Christ, our Sun

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