

HOMILY for TRINITY SUNDAY
Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne
4 June 2023

The psalm we heard this evening began with a kind of hope or blessing-prayer: 'May the Lord hear you in the day of trouble, and may the *Name* of the God of Jacob defend you.'

Why the *name* of the Lord? How can someone's name literally protect us? What's in a name?

Well, Trinity Sunday is precisely about the *name* of the Lord, and equally about how that great and sublime name protects us.

In the ancient world of the Bible, people believed that the names we were given had significance. Not because we were named after Auntie Flo or Grandad or Uncle Jim, but because of the actual meaning of the name. The name was thought to contain something of the essence of that person; so that to know someone's name therefore could give you power over them.

In the Gospels, for example, Jesus often won't allow the demons to name him — even though they're right in the titles, the names, they use. Jesus won't allow them to have power over him by naming him.

So what is the name of God which is revealed to us in Scripture?

It begins in the OT. At the burning bush God reveals the divine Name to Moses — 'I am who I am' — and that naming of God accompanies the liberating of the people of Israel from slavery. And God goes on revealing the sacred Name in the story of Israel, the Name that saves and frees and brings justice.

But at this stage in OT, God is revealed only as one, not yet fully as Trinity

Yet there's a hint of what will be revealed in our first reading from Genesis which tells the story of God creating the world. It's not a scientific description, but a poetic one, but it emphasises that God is present and active at each moment of creation — even now, as the world unfolds and changes.

But note that, when it comes to the creation of humanity, God says, 'Let us make human beings in our image'. And note it's women as well as men, women equally alongside men, who are made in God's image. God uses a kind of divine plural which, in the light of the New Testament, we realise indicates that God is not solitary, God is not alone, but is already community, in communion.

God's Name is only fully revealed with the incarnation: that is, with the coming of Jesus into the world.

In the New Testament and beyond, as the idea of the Trinity develops in the early church, we come to understand that that communion is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God who is both one and three at the same time: one God in three Persons, as we say. That's the sacred name of God, that's how God names Godself in Scripture and in the tradition which flows from it.

That Name lies at the very heart of Christian faith. It tells us that God is Father, the creator of the world, and that God is transcendent, above and beyond us in every sense, holy mystery.

The Name of God tells us that God is the Son, incarnate, one of us, one with us, bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. And Jesus lives out that humanity, and dies & rises again, taking our humanity up into God in the Ascension and laying it at the feet of God. It's the offering of the whole creation, the whole realm of matter, which Christ as the Son makes on our behalf.

The Name of God tells us that God is the Holy Spirit, imminent, close to us, indeed closer to us than our own breathing; the breathe of life in every flower and tree, every animal, every human being. The Spirit makes life possible. We realise that the 'wind from God' in Gen 1 that sweeps over the primeval darkness before creation, is in effect the Spirit of God, the life-giver, the might Wind who comes to the church at Pentecost.

So now we begin to hear the Name of God and to understand that God is transcendent — above and beyond us — and incarnate — in our flesh and blood — and also intimately close to us.

When we speak of God as holy Trinity, however, there are some qualifications we need to make, some points that are essential; we always need to be careful, in speaking of God because, like Moses at the burning bush, when we name God we're standing on holy ground.

First, we need to note that God is primarily the God and Father of Jesus Christ and only in a secondary sense *our* Father. And Jesus is not our Son but the Son of the Father. God becomes our Father because we enter by faith into Jesus' sonship; Jesus shares with us his own identity as the Son so that we too can become daughters and sons of God.

The second thing we need to remember is that the language here is symbolic or metaphorical, not literal. God the Father is not literally male; Jesus is male but in his humanity but not his divinity; and the Spirit is neither male nor female though can be described in masculine or feminine terms. We can't make the mistake of importing gender into the God who, although making male and female in the divine image, transcends all categories of male and female.

The third thing we need to do is to grasp the whole Name of God in all its breadth and complexity. Too often Christians fall back into Jesus-only language. I was looking at the website of a church some time ago, and it spoke only of Jesus as I scrolled down the pages: not one mention could I find of the Trinity!

The problem is that, if we narrow God to Jesus only, we end up with an impoverished image of God. The only message we have to offer the world is that Jesus died for our sins. And of course that's true, but it's only one aspect of God: one side of the Trinity and the incarnation. God the Father is also the creator of all things and all people, and creation is essential in our understanding of God. God the Spirit is present in creation & all people, whether they're formally Christians or not.

So let's not close God down; reduce God to one Person of the Trinity. Instead let's open ourselves to the full extent of the Name and nature of God who exists both within and beyond the borders of the church.

Perhaps in our mission, we should think not only of taking God to those who don't yet know God, but also of finding God already there, already at work; and our job then is to point to who God is: to name God and to identify the dynamic working of God in all people and all creation.

Here on Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the fact that God has given us God's own name, perhaps the greatest gift God gives us. Because in giving us the divine name, God gives us something of God's own self, which is otherwise total mystery.

So how does the Name protect us? In giving us the Name, God allows us, invites us to have power — not exactly power *over* God, but power to invoke God, to call upon God, and the confidence to know that God will hear us and respond.

To name God as Trinity — Father, Son & Holy Spirit — is to activate, set in motion the protective & loving power of God.

Because when we name God, God is gracious enough to reach out to us, to gather us in, to embrace us. ‘The name of God is a strong tower,’ says Proverbs (18:10); ‘the righteous run into it and are safe.’

In the famous Rublev icon there are three figures sitting around a table (Gen 18); and each is inclined towards the other, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the fourth place at the table is for us, for the church, indeed for creation itself. We’re invited to sit at the table with God the Holy Trinity, where we’re drawn into that intimacy and communion which lies at the heart of all reality.

Our calling is to sit at that table, to live under the protective shadow of the Name: in the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and to share the beauty and comfort of that Name with others, especially those who are poor, the despairing and the needy, the guilty, the dispossessed and the homeless.

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