

# starters for Sunday

## **Trinity Sunday**

**15 June 2014**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Very Rev Dr Finlay Macdonald, former Moderator and Principal Clerk, for his thoughts on Trinity Sunday.

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## Quick Guide...

*Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.*

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Trinity Sunday comes as a mid-point in the Christian year, both chronologically and liturgically. We have followed the cycle from Advent, through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Ascension tide and last Sunday we celebrated the Feast of Pentecost. Today we gather all of this up as we reflect on the mysterious nature of our God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some will number the Sundays from here on as Sundays after Pentecost, others as Sundays after Trinity. Either way the second half the Christian year lies before us as we continue to explore the rich heritage of faith.

### [Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a](#)

This text literally begins at the beginning with the so-called Priestly account of creation. Dating from the period of the Babylonian Exile, or shortly thereafter, this is the later of the two creation narratives found in Genesis. The earlier so-called Yahwist account, dating from around 900 BC, can be found immediately following our lectionary passage.

The preacher might want to make a connection with last Sunday's Pentecost theme by noting the early reference to the Spirit of God moving over the face of the water. The Hebrew word *ruah* is also translated 'breath'. Is this the Spirit which inspired the prophets and descended on Jesus at his baptism? Is this the breath which Jesus breathed on his disciples on the evening of the first Easter Day, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit'? Is this the Spirit which came in tongues of fire at Pentecost, turning fearful disciples into fearless apostles? There is much focus today on 'spirituality' and sometimes we console ourselves in face of declining numbers and diminishing Church influence by pointing to evidence of a more general spirituality on which people draw in a crisis – sometimes even turning to the Church at such times. It is therefore quite significant that the idea of Spirit emerges right at the start of the Bible.



Alongside the Spirit we can also note the other agency of creation – the Word of God. “God said ‘Let there be light’”; and the pattern continues: “God said...and it was so”. Like the Spirit the Word is also a recurring theme in Scripture, leading to in the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Note also that this Priestly version of the creation story culminates with the creation of humanity - male and female, both made in the image of God. The apple and the serpent do not feature here but appear in the earlier Yahwist account which takes over at chapter 2 verse 4b.

The passage concludes with reference to the Sabbath, providing an option of preaching on the difference between Sabbath rest and Lord’s Day celebration of the resurrection.

## **[Psalm 8](#)**

This much loved psalm continues the creation theme. It celebrates the Creator God and affirms the place of humankind in the divine order, namely as ‘a little lower than the angels’ but with dominion over the beasts of the field. There is much in this psalm, and in the verses from Genesis, to give us pause for thought. By the time Trinity Sunday is upon us it is highly probable that we shall have quite forgotten the destructive floods and tidal surges which last winter caused so much devastation in England and Wales. They brought the whole question of climate change into sharp focus. As I prepare these notes in February I find myself wondering how high that issue will be on the political agenda in June. Certainly there is much in today’s Old Testament texts to inspire a sermon on such themes.

On a different, though perhaps not entirely unrelated note, I never read this psalm without recalling the philosopher Immanuel Kant’s observation in his Critique of Practical Reason: ‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.’

## **[2 Corinthians 13: 11-13](#)**

This short Epistle reading of the concluding verses of 2nd Corinthians is offered precisely for that conclusion, namely a Trinitarian benediction used Sunday by Sunday in churches around the world. It’s quite a thought that when we use these words at the end of a service we are literally adopting a formula going right back to St Paul.



The ordering of the words is worth remarking on: ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.’ This might be compared with that other familiar Trinitarian benediction: ‘the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...’ In the latter Jesus is included relationally and entirely within the Godhead; in the former he is specifically named and acknowledged as ‘Lord’, source and embodiment of a grace which sits alongside the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Arising from this there is ample scope for a Trinity Sunday sermon on that related trinity of grace, love and communion.

### **St Matthew 28: 16-20**

Like the Epistle the Gospel lection comprises concluding verses and tells of the risen Jesus sending out his disciples with an instruction to baptise ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. This encounter takes place on a mountain in Galilee. Right from the start of his Gospel Matthew presents Jesus within a Mosaic framework – the flight into Egypt to escape a murderous king, a Gospel narrative in five main sections reflecting the Pentateuch, the setting forth of ethical laws in a Sermon on a Mount, transfiguration on a Galilean hilltop – and now this concluding scene, again on a mountain. In Scotland many people, whether Munro-baggers or strollers on gentler slopes and whether or not religious, find something of the transcendent and the spiritual among the hills. Last year, whilst on Iona for the Columba anniversary celebrations, I saw a performance of Alistair Rutherford’s play *An Island between Heaven and Earth*. Perhaps an equivalent description could be applied to that mountain in Galilee where Jesus commissioned his disciples.

Note also the response of the disciples to the Lord’s appearance – worship and doubt. By this point Judas had departed the scene so if, as we are told, there were eleven disciples present, Thomas must have been one of them. Was he still doubting? Indeed, had his doubts become infectious? The reference to ‘some’ doubting suggests more than one sceptic amongst the eleven. In his poem *The Scholar Gipsy* Matthew Arnold has a line in which he refers to his generation as ‘light half-believers in our casual creeds.’ We naturally contrast faith and doubt, but is the poet on to something when he introduces this third notion of casual ‘half-belief’?



Where does this fit on the spectrum? Might it be said that doubt at least engages rigorously with what is being proclaimed, whereas ‘light half-belief’ just doesn’t take it seriously at all.

There is also sermon potential in teasing out the distinction between worshipping and doubting. We might more naturally have expected the contrast to be between ‘recognising’ and ‘doubting’. At the end of the day perhaps the appropriate response to the risen Lord is neither facial recognition nor rational explanation but simply worship. As William Bright expresses it in a hymn for close of service (CH3 636):

And now the wants are told that brought  
Thy children to thy knee;  
Here lingering still, we ask for naught,  
But simply worship thee.

## Sermon Ideas

The foregoing commentary on the lectionary readings has suggested various launch points for sermons – some focussing quite specifically on Trinitarian themes; others more general and perhaps to be filed away for another day.

The Gospel emphasis on the disciples worshipping the risen Lord certainly offers the opportunity to preach on the theme of worship. Is there a danger as we become more and more accustomed to the marvellous things we can do, compared with earlier generations, that we lose our sense of wonder. Far from marvelling at the fact that I can have live face to face conversations with grandchildren in Australia through Skype or Face Time, I find myself getting grumpy when the connection is (very rarely) intermittent. The whole concept of such communication opportunities would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of earlier generations who left native shores, freely or otherwise, wondering if they would ever see home and family again. Yet how readily we take such marvels for granted!

Then there is the question of our approach to worship. I recall a summer holiday in Devon several years ago. A copy of the local church newsletter was in our rented cottage when we arrived and I read it with interest. It appeared that the vicar had been coming in for some criticism as people found his services rather dull. He responded by reminding his flock that his



task was to feed the sheep, not amuse the goats! I suspect that didn't do much to improve his standing.

Of course worship should not be dull, but is the answer for the preacher to become an entertainer? No doubt the Devon vicar could have made his point more diplomatically, but in his favour it could be said that he was anxious to avoid the dignity and holiness of worship becoming compromised. I also recall a teacher in one of my congregations remarking that nothing made her angrier than a minister in his or her children's address going for a cheap laugh at the expense of a child. It was a warning I took seriously.

Of course, Trinity Sunday affords the preacher an opportunity of explaining how the Church arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. It also allows him or her to focus on the mystery and the majesty of God who calls us to worship in the beauty of holiness.

The other theme hinted at in the comments on Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 relates to God the Creator and our place within creation – particularly in terms of environmental issues. How do we live out our humanity which has been entrusted with dominion, made in God's image and accorded a status which is little lower than the angels? The very fact that God takes on our humanity in Jesus Christ gives Christianity an earthly as well as a heavenly aspect. Jesus himself often drew lessons from nature and, in another famous parable, St Patrick used the humble shamrock to illustrate the Holy Trinity.

## Prayers

### Collect

Almighty and eternal God,  
through your Word and Spirit  
you created all things.

In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh,  
you reveal your salvation  
in all the world.

Through your Holy Spirit,  
you give us a share  
in your life and love.



Keep us firm in this faith,  
and fill us with the vision of your glory,  
that we may serve and praise you all our days;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns  
with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

### **Opening Prayer**

Let us remember and feel the presence of God with us now and lift up our hearts to God the Father, to whom we pray, God the Son through whom we pray, God the Holy Spirit in whom we pray.<sup>1</sup>

O Loving God, be near to us in this time of worship; open our ears to hear your voice; open our hearts to receive your grace; open our lips to show forth your praise; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour;

Let us now acknowledge and confess our sins, seeking God's pardon and renewing grace in our lives:

### **A prayer based on an old Hasidic meditation**

Guard me O Lord from brooding over the sin I have committed; let not my thoughts sink into the mire of my wrong doing, but free them to offer thee the pearl of good deeds. If I have done much evil, grant me that I may balance it by doing much good. Help me to hurry over the prayer 'For my sin' and to meditate with joy and thankfulness on the prayer 'Thou O Lord, shalt reign'<sup>2</sup>.

So now, gathered for worship on this Trinity Sunday we rejoice indeed that the Lord reigns, that our Saviour Jesus Christ is risen and ascended and that he sits at the right hand of the Father; as the sun's rays give light and life to all creation, so may the sun of righteousness energise and enliven all we are and all we do, making us worthy disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Parish Prayers ed. Frank Colquhoun, page 349, Hodder and Stoughton, 1967

<sup>2</sup> Based on Rabbi Yitzak Meir of Geer, died 1866 – quoted in God of a Hundred Names, page 185, Barbara Greene and Victor Gollancz, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1962



## Intercessions

We bring our intercessions now in the name of Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

Praying now in this strong name we reflect on the needs of our world and all its peoples and nations;

We pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ in its many manifestations around the world; for a spirit of unity in faith and purpose amongst the different denominations; we pray that Christian witness may be credible in a world awash with ideologies, where cultures clash and religion seems only to exacerbate conflict; open the eyes of those who are blind to any view other than their own; soften the hearts of those who claim a God-given right to maim and to kill; enlighten the minds of those whose sense of what is God-pleasing leaves little if any room for basic humanity in their dealings with those who do not share their views.

We pray for all who bear responsibility of government around the world; for those who make our laws and those who interpret and apply them; we pray for a greater harnessing of the gifts of all who can contribute to the common good and a more equal sharing of that good amongst the people.

And we pray for all known to us in special need of comfort, healing, love of neighbour, support of friends; we remember our own nearest and dearest and in a moment of quietness we articulate our own particular prayers in the silence of our hearts...

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Eternal God, whose love is stronger than death, we rejoice that the dead as well as the living are in your care; and as we remember with thanksgiving all who have gone before us in the way of Christ we pray that we may be counted worthy to share with them in the life of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.



## Time with Children

- Ask the children if they know their mother or father's Christian name;
- Then ask them what they call their mother and father. Hopefully the answer will be Mummy or Daddy;
- Then ask who calls their mother or father by their first names. Answers should include their parents' friends and their parents own parents (the children's grandparents);
- Then ask what strangers might call their parents. Hopefully, the answer will be Mr..... and Mrs.....
- Try then to make the point that their parents can be called by three different names, and ask if that makes them three different people.
- Apply this to the different ways we speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## Musical Suggestions

CH4 110	Glory be to God the Father
CH4 111	Holy, Holy, Holy
CH4 112	God, whose almighty word
CH4 113	God the Father of Creation
CH4 639	I bind unto myself today
CH4 209	Father we praise you
CH4 210	Awake my soul
CH4 211	Today I awake



## Additional Resources

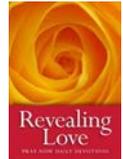
### Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

### Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



### Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

### Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and

delivering sermons regularly.

### Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Worship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

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*Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.*

