

## Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May 11am

Trinity Sunday – BBC Songs of Praise

**Isaiah 6.1-8**

**John 3.1-17**

On holiday in Suffolk last week, there were swallows nesting in the barn outside my window.

Every morning they gathered on the telephone wires, chattering to each other.

In the evening they swooped over the pond, catching insects for supper.

They arrived on 29<sup>th</sup> April, the farmer told me.

Every year, when he first sees them return, they make his heart smile.

Aristotle famously said that one swallow does not make a summer.

His pupil, Theophrastus, dutifully set himself the task of writing a treatise on exactly how many swallows it took.

I suspect that Nicodemus was rather a Theophrastus kind of bloke.

*'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.*

*For no-one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'*

Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as a teacher with authority from God.

He cites the evidence he has seen – the miraculous signs.

He knows exactly how many swallows make a summer.

And how many miracles make a real, God-inspired Rabbi.

Nicodemus has pre-conceived categories of what the religious life should look like.

He wants Jesus to fit his definitions.

Jesus answers him:

*'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above,'*

'Born from above,' says the New Revised Standard Version, as we heard this morning.

'Born again,' the New International Version translates it.

The Greek word, *anōthen*, holds both of these meanings.

Jesus is deliberately and intentionally ambiguous in using this word.

He wants Nicodemus to move beneath the surface meanings and definitions of things to something deeper, more complex, more dynamic.

Not everything is reducible to a treatise on exactly how many swallows make a summer.

But Nicodemus doesn't get it.

He protests that being born again is physically impossible – how can a grown man get back into his mother's womb?

His language and his imagination are just not flexible enough.

Theophrastus and his treatise on swallows, Nicodemus and his desire to fit Jesus into his categories of what God can or cannot do: these are in a long line of western thinkers who like neat definitions.

Plato writes, in *The Republic*, that we shouldn't let ourselves be distracted by the beauty of the stars that decorate the sky.

The wonderful panoply of heaven, spread out by a creator with an eye for glory, as the psalmist imagines it – no, what matters for Plato is what he calls reality.

The 'true relative velocities, in pure numbers and perfect figures, of the orbits and what they carry in them, which are perceptible to reason and thought.'

Today is Trinity Sunday.

I wonder how many sermons you have heard on the Trinity which involve shamrock leaves? Or ice, water and steam?

How we long to define the Trinity in a way that we can understand.

To capture it in a picture that doesn't fry our brains.

One God in three persons.

So how does that work exactly?

Can we explain God the Trinity, as Plato would wish, in pure numbers and perfect figures, which are perceptible to reason and thought?

The early Christians wrestled with this concept.

They too were caught up in the desire to explain, understand, define.

At the Council of Nicaea in 325 they got the Trinity pinned down, once and for all, in the words of the Nicene Creed.

But, like Nicodemus, we still find ourselves bewildered.

The idea that God is not one person but three – what does that mean?

And why?

Of course we are to love God with our minds.

We have been created with intelligence, and we are to use it.

When the farmer welcomed those swallows back to his Suffolk farm on April 29<sup>th</sup>, he knew that they had spent the winter in the warmth of South Africa.

Gilbert White, back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, before birds' migration routes were understood, thought they spent the colder months hibernating at the bottom of ponds.

Those of us who made it to the end of Stephen Hawkins' 'Brief History of Time' had a glimpse of the extraordinary complexity of the universe.

To know these things – to understand the extraordinary flight paths of the swallows, to have some kind of sense of the Big Bang and the nature of Black Holes – can make things more marvellous, not less.

But knowing about things is no substitute for knowing them.

When the heart smiles because the swallows have returned – that's because they dive and swoop and chatter in the dewy morning air, and they make us glad to be alive.

When we think that knowing about things is all there is, when we try to reduce God to a formula, to delineate God with the busy, analytical left hemisphere of our brain, to construct a creed to define the Trinity, we are left with something rather flat, rather thin, something a long way from the radically disturbing, heart-pounding oddness that is characteristic of Biblical encounters with God.

While awaiting death in prison, Socrates, champion of rational truth, is visited by his daemon – his conscience, his sub-conscious mind.

His daemon has a message for him.

*Make music.*

Socrates was committed to the life of the mind.

Everything is reducible to rational analysis.

You can know the truth if you just apply a little intelligent thought.

But, facing death, something in him rebelled.

There is more to life than the rigorous intellect.

*Make music.*

This coming Friday is the first ever BBC Music Day.

The BBC says it's a nationwide celebration of everything we love about music.

It aims to bring people together from all backgrounds, all ages and across musical genres.

So the BBC are here in Hinde Street this morning to film a new version of a traditional hymn, as part of a special Songs of Praise to go out next Sunday evening.

*Make music.*

Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, was one of our greatest hymn writers.

He wrote over 9,000 poems, many of which were set to music.

His brother John believed that everyone should be able to sing their faith.

Hymns were more than just an attractive worship option.

They were a way of bringing heart, mind, soul and body into worship.

We've just sung one of Charles Wesley's greatest hymns –

*O for a thousand tongues to sing My great redeemer's praise...*

Charles believed that making music together brought us deep into the heart of God.

What has this got to do with Trinity Sunday?

If I were to come up with an image of the Trinity that didn't involve leaves or kettles, I would choose music.

I have sung in choirs since I was 11 years old.

Making music is deep in my psyche.

My favourite singing experience?

Singing the Hallelujah Chorus in an Albert Hall packed with enthusiastic teenagers and five brass bands?

Singing in the British premier of Arvo Pärt's Passio in a darkened St Albans Abbey at midnight?

Singing on one of the backing tracks on Snow Patrol's album 'A hundred Million Suns'?

Live music is exciting.

You have words.

You have a score, a tune, harmonies.

But that's not enough.

But you don't know what it will sound like till you put it all together.

Till you open your mouth and sing.

Till you all sing together.

Then you create something which has never been heard before.

And will never be heard again.

Something which sets your heart racing, and floods your body with endorphins.

Singing together enables us not just to imagine the energy of God, not just to think about what it might mean to have a Trinitarian God who is characterised by relationship, but to participate in the life of God ourselves.

This is what Isaiah experienced in the year that King Uzziah died.

His experience is firmly located in the left hemisphere world of political rulers and historical dates.

But what matters – what shakes him to the core – what changes his life for ever – is not chronology.

It is not left-brain analysis and explanation.

It is music.

He is caught up in the antiphonal singing of the Seraphim.

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts  
The whole earth is full of his glory.*

Being part of this divine music-making, experiencing the presence of God through music that shook the foundations and walls of the temple - this gives Isaiah the courage to say, 'Here I am. Send me.'

He is invited to join the song.

So today, on Trinity Sunday, in celebration of BBC Music Day, we too are invited to join the song.

Guide me O thou Great Redeemer first appeared in Welsh in 1745.

The tune Cwm Rhondda was first heard 150 years later, in 1905, at a music festival in Pontypridd.

A hundred years on – and today we will be singing a new version with Christian rap artists Adam and Kid.

When I went to Pimlico last night to hear Adam and Kid for the first time – the walls of the room shook.

I felt like Isaiah in the temple!

Music keeps changing.

God doesn't stand still.

When we sing, we too are invited to participate in the dynamic, musical life of God who is melody and word and harmony.

Amen.