

Teach us to dance!

A sermon preached by Rev Dr Helen Jenkins
at our joint communion service on Trinity Sunday, 27 May 2018
Our readings were Isaiah 6:1–8 and John 3:1–17

Did you watch the Royal Wedding? I have to say I'm glad I wasn't preaching last weekend so I didn't have to directly follow that sermon! Whatever you think of the Royal Family and all that surrounds them, and the Church of England and all that surrounds it, it was certainly an example of how our institutions can do ceremony very impressively.

Imagine the setting for the Royal Wedding, a huge, beautiful space, full of people, but replace David Beckham, Elton John and the rest with six-winged angels, not sitting in pews but flying, and not singing hymns but calling praises to God such that the building shakes. Imagine the building filled not with polite chatter but with smoke. And imagine the centre of it all being not the Duke and Duchess of Sussex but the Lord God, seated on a throne.

Perhaps we get somewhere towards the sense of the vision that Isaiah found himself swept up into – something of the sense of awe and beauty and sense of occasion of the Royal wedding, but something way, way beyond that. I imagine Isaiah's description doesn't begin to convey what he experienced – it is beyond words.

And then imagine yourself, parachuted into the middle of it. I don't know about you, but I'd feel pretty out of place at a Royal wedding, so how much more out of place would I feel surrounded by angels in the very presence of God? But that is where Isaiah finds himself, and not only is he present, but he becomes briefly the centre of the action as an angel approaches him with a coal from the alter, and touches his lips, declaring forgiveness. Then, cleansed, Isaiah is given his commission by God, a message to take to the people. "Here I am Lord" he says, "send me".

If Isaiah's presence in the temple seems a bit of an anomaly, then perhaps so too did Bishop Michael Curry's at the Royal wedding. The choice of preacher had raised eyebrows in some quarters in advance, particularly among those aware of the challenges in the relationship between The Episcopal Church of which he is the presiding bishop and the Church of England over same-sex relationships. I'm guessing there probably aren't all that many African Americans who have preached at St George's chapel, and certainly not at such a high profile occasion.

And he came in, and turned the expectations of what happens on such occasions upside down! Into the most formal, reserved setting he breathed life and passion, and his message became the thing that everyone was talking about. And what a message it was – he pulled no punches in spelling out the redeeming power of love and the transformation that Jesus can bring. It was unexpected, but instead of undermining the occasion it added to it, brought new life.

It seems fitting when we remember that Jesus about whom he preached also came into a religious setting with its own set of expectations and norms and blew them out of the water. We saw in the passage from John some of the impact he had even so early on in his ministry – Nicodemus is a Pharisee, part of the religious establishment, and he's so nervous about seeing Jesus that he comes to him at night, so no-one else will know.

He too proceeded to have his expectations turned upside down. What was all this about being born again, born from above, born of the Spirit? That wasn't the usual

topic of discussion amongst the Pharisees. This was something new and different – he'd seen it in Jesus' life and ministry, experienced that God was at work, and now he was receiving a somewhat baffling explanation, of new birth and being born of the Spirit.

And then comes possibly the most famous verse in Scripture, that is so often used to sum the whole thing up: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life".

Today is Trinity Sunday, and as I don't generally aim to preach heresy I'm not even going to attempt an explanation of how the Trinity works, how God can be three people and yet one. You may have your own favourite illustration that helps you get your head round it, or you may be with me in concluding it's a mystery and is best left that way – trying to work it out just makes my head hurt!

Knowing we will never understand fully doesn't get us out of engaging with the idea at all though. In our readings we've seen something of each of the three persons – God in the temple, majestic, awesome, indescribable. Jesus the man, engaging in intellectual debate, meeting someone where they are. And Jesus talks of the Spirit, through whom we are born a second time, and who blows us into new places where we might never have expected to go.

At the heart of the Trinity is relationship – the three persons of the Godhead relating with one another. We see it described at Jesus baptism, where God speaks words of delight and the Spirit descends like a dove – all three persons clearly present and interacting.



Many theologians have described this relationship as being like a dance. Jonathan Marlowe explains it like this:

"The theologians in the early church tried to describe this wonderful reality that we call Trinity. If any of you have ever been to a Greek wedding, you may have seen their distinctive way of dancing... It's called perichoresis. There are not two dancers, but at least three. They start to go in circles, weaving in and out in this very beautiful pattern of motion. They start to go faster and faster and faster, all the while staying in perfect rhythm and in sync with each other. Eventually, they are dancing so quickly (yet so effortlessly) that as you look at them, it just becomes a blur. Their individual identities are part of a larger dance. The early church fathers and mothers looked at that dance (perichoresis) and said, 'That's what the Trinity is like.' It's a harmonious set of relationship in which there is mutual giving and receiving. This relationship is called love, and it's what the Trinity is all about. The perichoresis is the dance of love."

Any image like this for the Trinity will only ever be a metaphor, but the beauty of this metaphor of dance is that it is one that can draw others in. The dance isn't one that is exclusive to the Godhead, but instead they reach out to draw us into it. We too can be part of that beautiful pattern of interweaving dance partners; we too can get caught up in the energy, the rhythm, the passion. We can find in it a place of transformation.

And the dance isn't just for us here in the church, it's for the whole world. For God so loved not 'the people in church on a Sunday' or 'the people who live blameless lives' but God so loved the world, kosmos in the Greek, everything and everyone. This is a party that everyone's invited to. Bishop Michael knew that as he threw the invitation far and wide. Nicodemus discovered it, even as he met with Jesus in secret.

But for others to join in, they need an invitation, and they may need to hear that invitation over and again before they find the courage to put a foot in the dance and risk being swept up. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" God asks Isaiah. Do we have the courage to join Isaiah in responding "Here I am, send me!" Will we allow our lives and words to be an invitation to others to join the dance.

When we come to communion, we will encounter God in Trinity there, as we offer our praise and thanks to the Father, remember the actions of the Son, and pray that the Spirit will breathe through what we do so that bread and wine are more than mere food and drink, but a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality as through them we meet with Jesus anew. It's a place where we find sustenance for the dance, here together in community.

So today, whether you have been immersed in the dance for many years or whether you feel like you're only dipping your toes in the edges, whether you hear the rhythm and know all the steps or are worried about tripping over your own feet and getting it wrong, whether your pace is fast or slow, will you come and join the dance of the Trinity, and as you join it will you hold out your hands to others and invite them in too to a place where everything can be turned around as we live and learn in community with each other and with God.

We're going to sing now – teach me to dance – whether actually or metaphorically, let's invite God to lead us in the dance.

(Singing the Faith 477)