

SERMON for Trinity Sunday – June 4th, 2023.

Readings: Exodus 34: 1-8; Song of the 3; 2 Corinthians 13: 11-14; Matthew 28: 16-20

I don't know if any of you have read any of American author, Philip Yancey's books or seen any interviews with him? I remember seeing an interview he gave in Sydney, some years back, where he tells the story of a couple from South Africa.

The couple had been very involved in the fight against Apartheid but when that ended they were at a bit of a loss what to do with their lives. What they decided to do was to get involved in prison ministry in one of the most violent, notorious prisons any where in the world, just out of Cape Town. This was a prison where some of the worst, most violent criminals were placed. It was grossly overcrowded and conditions were horrendous.

He reported that before they started visiting, the serious crime rate in the prison was over 260 cases per year. The year after they started their ministry, there were 2, the following year none! Yancey asked them how they achieved it - did they take God into the prison with them? "No", the woman answered, "God was already there, but our job was to make God visible."¹

"Our job was to make God visible."

I remember the powerful impact that statement had on me at the time, and still does come up for me as a very powerful calling in my ministry – to make God visible.

As a Third Order Franciscan, our first Aim as a religious order, is 'to make our Lord known and loved everywhere', which is why I think this phrase – to make God visible – struck such a chord with me. Kind of the same but different!

For those of you who were here last Sunday as we celebrated Pentecost, you may remember we heard two versions of the giving of the Holy Spirit. First was Luke's version from the reading in Acts, which is the one most of us think about when we consider the coming of the Holy Spirit and Pentecost. But we also heard John's version which is wrapped up in a command - we heard Jesus say; "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said; "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Today, as we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we again hear the command to go out to others with the good news; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Two weeks running in our readings we have had Jesus calling his disciples to go out and engage the world.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Many of us are incredibly challenged by this command and feel ourselves either unworthy, incompetent or haven't a clue where to start. Few of us have been or will be called to serve God in missionary work. By that most think of working overseas - literally taking the gospel to all nations - let alone undertaking missionary work on our own doorstep!

I ended my sermon last week with the call of St Theresa of Avila to be:

[Christ's body, hands and feet here on earth now]

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours;

yours are the eyes through which he is to look with compassion on the world;
yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
and yours the hands with which he is to bless us now.

That is to make God visible! That, I believe, is what we are called to.

St Francis is famously misquoted as saying: "Preach the gospel always, if you have to, use words!"

I strongly believe that it is not so much your words which will draw others to God but how we live our lives. Even when we live with our doubts and questions, our dry times and vacuums, when God seems so very far away, most of us continue to live our lives, often unconsciously, in obedience to the gospel's calling.

Through this, in our own small way, we can make God visible!

In our first reading we hear of Moses' return visit to Mt Sinai. The first time he had come down with the 10 commandments carved onto two stone tablets. When he got back to the Israelite camp he discovered that they had got bored of waiting for him and so had talked Aaron into making a golden calf idol which they intended to worship. In his fury and frustration, Moses had flung down the tablets and they had broken. Now he was back up the mountain with another set of tablets, as God had promised to engrave his commandments again.

We hear God announce himself:

"The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." [Exodus 34: 6-7]

This allows us to know something of the character of God. The physical stone tablets which Moses would take back with him would be a reminder of that - if you like, making God visible to the Israelites.

Both the epistle and the gospel contain the Trinitarian formula, which probably is why they were chosen as readings for today.

Paul's greeting: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." has remained in common usage among many Christians - we use it often as "The Grace".

Matthew's commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is one of the earliest examples of the Trinitarian formula and one of the few places it is actually found in the New Testament.

The Trinity - our three in one God - is one of the most difficult aspects of our faith to explain or prove, and, at the end of the day, is a matter of faith.

While we are used to saying "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", perhaps an easier way of considering God is rather by function: "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier" or what has become my favourite: "Source of all being, Eternal Word and Life-giving Spirit".

While we acknowledge the existence of God, some have described Jesus as "God with skin on" and the Holy Spirit as God's presence with us now. Rather than getting caught up in tricky theology, I think we need to focus on the commission we have been given to make God known everywhere.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." so "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." - Make God visible, in this world, now.

Revd Sally Buckley
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1. *An Evening with Philip Yancey* DVD
2. Words more or less attributed to St Francis of Assisi