

## IN THE HOLE HE GOES

Acts 2: 36-42

May 22 2016 (Trinity Sunday)

Well today is Trinity Sunday and it's a day we ministers love because we get to explain the doctrine of the Trinity which is a whole lot of fun....

Sad to say it's not an easy task.

For starters the whole idea of something being three in one and one in three isn't that easy to get our heads round.

And secondly because it's not in the Bible.

The word Trinity is not found anywhere in the Bible.

However that doesn't mean that we can't take it seriously.

There are lots of things that are important for our faith that aren't in the Bible.

Lots of important stuff that we have discovered about faith have come about after the actual writing of the Bible.

For example, the Bible doesn't say that the church must be run in this way or that way, but we know that we need to organise ourselves as a church, in order to continue the work of Jesus.

The Bible doesn't say to get rid of slavery altogether, but God has shown us that it needed to go.

The season of Lent, (the lead up to Easter), is not found in the Bible.

The word Lent is nowhere in our Bibles.

But after reflection on the importance for us all of spiritual preparation, it is something that we can take part in.

If Jesus needed to take time out for reflection how much more do we?!!

And God blesses us as we take part in Lent.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's a day to remember the nature of God.

Even though the Bible itself does not use the word Trinity, after reflecting on the nature of God the idea of the Trinity began to take root.

There appeared to be three ways of understanding God's nature and how God interacts with us.

Now that doesn't mean that we've got God all sussed.

God is mystery. God cannot be fully known.

And of all the descriptions of the divine perhaps the one that is the most tenuous for us to grasp is the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

We can have some kind of image of the creator or heavenly parent  
We can (perhaps best of all) have an image of Jesus the man.  
But the Holy Spirit is elusive.

And that is ironic really because the Spirit is the way you and I mostly encounter God.

The Spirit is God's presence with us today.

Remember that story of the wee girl whose hamster died?  
She decided she wanted to have a funeral service in her garden.

And as it was her pet, she thought she would be the one to conduct the service.  
She dug a hole in the soil in the garden.  
She found a wee box to put the hamster in and invited her friends and family round for the ceremony.  
When it came time for the committal she picked up the box, walked over to the earth and said "*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole he goes!*"  
And dropped the hamster down...

In the hole he goes...

Now obviously had she not misheard the phrase she would know that the words were "Holy Ghost".  
But 'Holy Ghost' hardly makes the idea of the Holy Spirit clearer.

It's hard to think of anything more vague than a ghost!

Thankfully despite that ancient hymn weve just sung, the name Ghost is really not used now. Spirit is a much better word.

But is a spirit a person?  
Is the Spirit he, she or it?

It's a great question to ask because in scripture there are three different words used to describe the Holy Spirit.

Greek word **paraclete** is masculine.  
Greek word **pneuma** is neuter.  
Hebrew word **ruach** is female.

So you can take your pick!!!

Given that God is traditionally spoken of as Father, and that Jesus is undeniably male, I quite like to speak of the Spirit as 'she'.  
But just as God isn't really a man, the Spirit is not really a woman.

Thinking of the Spirit as a female is as equally daft as thinking of God as a male.

One helpful picture of the Trinity goes like this.

### **Beyond, Beside, and Within.**

God the Father or Creator is the God that is **beyond** us.

God the Son (Jesus) is God come to walk **beside** - alongside us in our human experience.

God the Spirit is the voice of God **within** us.

The most common picture used to depict the Holy Spirit is the dove.

That's how the Spirit appeared at Jesus baptism.

The Celtic Church had another symbol – and that was the Wild Goose. They reckoned it displayed another aspect to the Spirit.

The dove is very safe and peaceful and comforting. And the Holy Spirit brings these things. But she also has a radical side.

She also comes to challenge us, to shake us, to stir us up to action and sometimes to disturb us.

So the wild goose showed that side of her.

In recent years the Iona Community right here in Scotland have rediscovered that ancient image.

The music group of the Community is called the Wild Goose Worship Group, and all their books are produced by Wild Goose Publications.

At Pentecost the Spirit came to the disciples.

What was the immediate effect?

That they all understood the sacrament of baptism,  
or the idea of the Trinity,  
or whether there should be women elders,  
or what time was the best time to hold a service,  
or the right and proper way to host the communion meal?

No – the thing that the Spirit brought to them was **power**.

This power transformed them from people who were full of fear and hiding away in secret – to change full circle.

When the Spirit came they were right out on the street – filled with courage - shouting their faith to the world.

In the words of that well-known Pentecost hymn...

*“The world in sheer amazement, the truth must now declare;  
that men who once were cowards, are brave beyond compare;*

*and tongues, which could not utter their faith in Jesus' name, defy all persecution his glory to proclaim!"*

The Spirit had brought power to the followers of Jesus.

Now power isn't necessarily something that is a good association.  
Power isn't something that necessarily helps us.

At first the church was a small grassroots alternative community.  
But when the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian he elevated Christianity to the position of 'official faith' and gave the church great wealth and status.

That power has haunted the church ever since.

In the middle ages the especially church was guilty of using its power to coerce and bully people.

There was a time when a career in the church was one that could lead to great riches and control over others.

The official church lost the plot so much that over the years wars and persecutions were carried out in the name of the church.

In fact the loss of the church's power and position and respect that is bemoaned by many people in today's society is probably a good thing.

The pomp and circumstance of the opening and closing of the Church's General Assembly does nothing to make us better followers of Christ - and in fact may detract from it.

The church should never be part of the "establishment".

Jesus renounced wealth and privilege and I don't see how the church can be different.

So lets be clear - the church does **not** need power in terms of position or respect or authority.

What the church really **DOES** need to do is to recognise the power of God.

Where power can be helpful is when we realise that the power that matters is not ours, but is something that belongs to God.

Where power can be helpful; is when we are actually trusting God.

In other words, when have a radical faith not in ourselves and in our ability or status, but in our God.

Its not we who have the power. The power is God's.

And that power is not about riches or control or bullying or coercion - it's about love and compassion and a willingness to bravely step out in order to serve others.

It's seen when we trust and believe that God can do great things.

One of the things that the church needs to recover is this radical trust.

It's easy to lose hope – to relegate our faith to the back of our minds rather than living each day in the knowledge of God in our lives, and seeing what can be done.

The power that the first Christians received gave them no status, honour, clout or riches - but it filled them all with hope.

It opened their mind to the fact that they were part of the most amazing family of people and part of a fantastic new movement which was going to work to change the world.

And it can be the same for us if we think of church less as a club for those of us with nothing else to do on a Sunday morning and more as a radical movement that God wants to work through to bring life and hope.

We are called to belong to that same movement and God's Spirit is with us too.

Our job is not the same as those people on the Day of Pentecost.

Our job is not to wait hidden away in a secret room for God to turn up through the Spirit but to open up our lives so that the Spirit can work in us.

The same power, the power of God that inspired and challenged and energised the first Christians is still in our world and as we turn to God we can access this.

The Spirit brings peace and meaning and comfort – but she also comes to disturb us, to bring challenge and to call us to the adventure that comes from taking Jesus seriously.

So on this day of Trinity let us give thanks especially for the power of God's Spirit – power to change our lives and power to change our world.

Let's open ourselves up - that we might become aware of the Spirit that has been gifted to us - bringing hope to our lives, our families, our church and our world.