

I speak in the name of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You might be surprised to note that until I came to St. James a few months ago I hadn't preached in my home pulpit for many years. I'd gone up into a pulpit when I was asked to preach somewhere else, and that was their custom, but I was much more comfortable on a regular basis preaching in my home church from the steps at the sanctuary. I can actually be more specific and say that until I came here, I'd stayed out of my home pulpit since Trinity Sunday, 1992.

I remember the day well. I was a very cocky young curate fresh out of seminary. I'd just completed 8 years of theological study, I'd read all the trendy new books that had been written on Trinitarian theology, and I saw that Trinity Sunday as my opportunity to dazzle the congregation with my theological sophistication. I was going to treat them to some of my knowledge so that they'd leave church that day with a clear understanding of the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

I'll never forget the feeling I had halfway through that sermon. I completely lost my way. I realized when I looked up that nobody, not one person, was listening to anything that I had to say. I have never felt so alone in a room full of people, and I tell you, if you're standing high in a pulpit, it's a very exposed place to be, so it's taken me how many years to overcome that feeling.

I didn't make it to the end of my text that day. Cut my losses. Mumbled a quiet "amen" and went extremely humbled and chastened out of the pulpit. My very wise grandfather said that if I'd gone up the pulpit steps with the same attitude with which I'd come down them, I would've given a much better sermon.

What I learned that day, among other things, is that the Trinity isn't a problem to be solved. Rather, the Trinity is something to be worshiped and glorified. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come. Every year Trinity Sunday comes around and my heart sinks. I'm tempted to ignore it or invite a visiting preacher, but I realize it's a good discipline for any preacher to preach on the Trinity. It keeps me humble and honest as a preacher as I prepare to speak on the great mystery that is God.

I'm mindful that I stand before you, high above you, in this pulpit, not to entertain you with holy thoughts but to point us towards the God who is holy, mysterious,

ineffable and beyond our understanding. In that humble spirit, let me share with you some thoughts from the epistle set for today. The fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. It's a very dense and rich few verses, and in those 5 verses, Paul talks about the process of justification, and he shows how each person of the Trinity is involved in that process.

Let me start with verse 1. Romans chapter 5.

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God," which begs the question, "What does it mean to be justified?" There are several meanings, but in the Bible the predominant meaning of the word "justified" is to be brought into right relationship. To be justified with God means to be brought into right relationship with him. We have a sense of that usage when we edit a text on our computer. When we justify a text, we bring all the lines at the end of a page into a good relationship with each other, into a straight line. If we're justified in a biblical sense, we're brought into a good, straight-forward and honest, open relationship with our heavenly father. We have peace with God.

The word "therefore" at the start of the passage reminds us that being at peace with God is not the normal state of affairs. In the previous chapter, Paul is talked at length about how sin has entered our world and spoiled God's creation. The sad truth is that we are born into a world that is alienated from the God who made it. We're out of sync with our surroundings when we're not right with God. Before we find peace within ourselves, we need to be at peace with our creator and find our place in his creation.

At this point I'll remind myself that I once heard a priest from Turin who spoke for 3 hours about sin. He never left space to talk about grace, so he never got under my skin, so I'll move on from sin and talk about grace, which is at the heart of this chapter. In fact, the word "grace" comes 10 times in this chapter, which is more than any other chapter in the Bible. Paul's central point in this chapter, indeed in his whole writings, isn't to talk about the problem of sin. It's to talk about the wonderful mystery of God's grace.

Though we were estranged from our creator, God, he has reached out to us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, to restore our relationship with him. That is his wondrous work of grace. If we look ahead in the passage to verse 10, Paul writes, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more surely having been reconciled

will we be saved by his life." That's the work of grace. God reaching out to us in the person of Jesus. The relationship is restored by God. He didn't wait for us to work our own way back to him, to do enough good deeds to earn that right. He got there first, while we were still sinners, Paul says.

God sought us out and brought us back into his fold by the work of grace in Christ Jesus. There's a great word in this passage which only occurs 2 or 3 times in the New Testament. Actually I think it came up a couple of weeks ago in one of our readings. It's the Greek word *prosagoge*. It comes in verse 2 of this passage where St. Paul writes, "Through Jesus, we have gained access to this grace in which we stand." *Prosagoge* there is translated "gained access." It's the word used when someone is ushered into the presence of royalty. You can't just walk into the court of a king or into the oval office. If you tried, a security guard would invariably intercept you before you got anywhere near where you wanted to go, but if one of the president's people, if one of the king's minister's escorted you, you'd gain access to the king. They'd lead you right past the guards, they'd all nod at you as you entered into the court of the king.

That's what Paul is saying Jesus does for us. Left to our own devices, we were separated from God, but if we accept that gift of grace, the gift of faith that is offered in Christ Jesus, he can lead us into the very presence of God. Through him we gain access to our creator, God. We are justified with God. We can be reconciled to him. Our relationship with our Creator can be restored because of Christ's work in grace.

Notice Paul uses the word "stand" here. Grace is a gift in which we stand. Yes, God is holy and majestic, but we're not called to grovel before him. We're not told to crawl into his presence. We're invited to stand. The language here is very personal and relational, which is no coincidence, because what the doctrine of the trinity invites us to do is to understand God as a network of relationships. Surely that's what the Bible means when God is described as love. "God is love," the Bible states. God is the love that makes up the relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which is a very different image of God to the one many people have. We're invited to think of God more like a family than, say, some angry old man up there beyond the clouds, looking down on us, or some sort of impersonal force at work in the universe, which is another image that people have.

In one of H.G. Wells's books there's a story of a man whose mind was in danger of collapse, and his doctor told him that his best hope was to find peace and fellowship with God. "What?" He said. "To think of that up there having fellowship with me, I would've soon think of cooling my throat with the Milky Way or shaking hands with the stars." He had no concept of a God with whom we could have fellowship or be in relationship, but that's what the Bible invites us to do. That's what the doctrine of the Trinity encourages us to do.

It's only when we realize that our God is the God who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ that there comes into life that possibility of an intimacy with God, of knowing God personally - that new relationship which St. Paul calls justification. We come to know the Father through the Son and they make their home with us through the Spirit.

Verse 5 says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." God's love is not sprinkled on us. It doesn't trickle down to us. It's poured - poured into our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul, who wrote these words, he's often dismissed as being cold and rationalistic, but he's writing here from experience. His theology isn't all about getting the doctrines right. He writes about how his experience of God has changed his life, about how he came to know God as God poured his spirit into his heart. Paul's bringing us back here to where I began. The Trinity is not some divine conundrum that needs to be solved. The Trinity is to be worshiped, adored and experienced. Through the work of the Spirit, the reality of God is realized in the heart of every believer. If we're to grasp the richness and fullness of what it means to be justified, then we, like St. Paul, need to appreciate the role of all the persons of the Trinity at work in the process of justification. It's instituted by the love of God, the Father. It's won for us by the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. It's made real for us through the gift of God's Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we can come to experience the love which is before all things, in all things and behind all things. Amen.