

Sermon preached at Scots  
15 June 2014 Trinity Sunday

Readings: Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a  
Matthew 28:16–20

“...a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

Dance has played an important role in my life, not that I ever mastered formal ballroom or even learned tap or ballet. It is just something that I’ve discovered that whenever music is playing there is a response from deep within which sets my whole body moving in time with the rhythms being played. Those of you who heard me speak about the way Denise used the image of dance in the way she approached her life with cancer will know how powerful that has been as an image. Now, entering this new phase of my life, dance is still there with a new partner and new rhythms to learn and attune myself to.

The suggested theme that was offered for the readings for today is *Expressed Love*. It seems to me a perfect match for how I have begun this proclamation of the gospel. Looking around you see the balloons – red, yellow and blue – the primary colours from which we can derive all other colours. It is a useful way into an understanding of the Trinity in that each of the primary colours makes its own contribution to any particular colour. In a similar way some of the early Greek thinkers pictured the Trinity and used the word perichoresis which means “to move around” or “to dance”. In their thinking the three aspects of God that they named Father, Son and Spirit move together in an unending dance.

The first expression is that of creation. I’ve talked about how I see love woven into the fabric of the universe. Well, the image of God dancing is also a very old one. In Proverbs we find reference to Wisdom, one of the aspects of God in Hebrew thought, dancing beside God as the foundation of the universe were laid down. Some have seen that almost the way one sees a delightful child dancing beside their parent while they are doing something serious, but a more careful reading of the text indicates the dance itself is part of the creative process, that creation has within it the rhythms of life. The act of creation is an act of love. In all the biblical imagery there is no thought of utility. Creation – unlike Douglas Adams perspective in the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Universe series of books, where the Earth and surrounds has been made to solve a particular problem – creation comes out of the divine creativity pure and simply as an act of grace. There is an understanding that the universe need not have been, but that God made it so, and the dancing partner reveals it as an act of divine love and pure joy. Creation in any shape or form is properly understood as an act of expressed love.

In Genesis we read of the Spirit at the beginning of the creation. The translation used traditionally speaks of the wind sweeping over the face of the earth, but once again we can get richer imagery out of the Hebrew. The wind, the ruach, is also the name for the spirit. The older translations used to use the language of hovering over the face of the waters and relate that to the dove, but the word used is most commonly associated elsewhere with the eagle, and eagles don’t hover, they soar until such time as they spot something that interests them and at that point they circle around, riding the thermals and using the air. So we have this added image then of the spirit circling around waiting for the divine creative process to get underway.

With the help of John’s gospel in the opening prologue we find ourselves with the image of the Son present at creation also. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was addressed to God, and the Word was God. Once again there is a dynamic relationship between the figures of the Trinity, and this time John invites us to see the Son, present at the beginning of creation, in the figure of Jesus, and that is where we move on to the next part.

The second expression is found in the same passage but also in the reading from Genesis. It relates to the creation of humanity. Here people are created to join in the work of the creator in tending and sustaining creation. We are created not as the animals and creatures of the earth and sea and sky, but in the image of God, according to God’s likeness – male and female God created us. Now the Greek Fathers as they are

known in talking about this perichoresis in the Trinity, also applied it to humankind. We also are created to join in the dance. Yes there are some tasks given according to Genesis, but those tasks are not our sole purpose. Even though we've turned dancing into a pursuit all of its own, dance itself is a natural expression of the rhythms of the universe within us. It has no real purpose apart from the expression of that which is within. Whether it be a child bouncing in time, ballerina's moving so intricately, couples gliding around the room, villagers around a fire in the centre of the village, or couples just getting it together in harmony with one another, dance can be an expression of our deepest being whether we're suave and sophisticated or rusty old movers, whether we're dancing for joy or out of the depths of grief. Dance for us is also an expression of love.

I think there are some things that flow on from that image. If we are made in God's image and the Godhead, the Trinity, is this dynamic dancing into existence then we're being invitees to give expression to the dance within our own lives. This has the potential to welcome all into the dance of sustaining life in all its fullness. It can be such an inclusive thing – there are many roles for people who participate in a dance not just the dancers, but those watching, the musicians, and support staff and caterers! There is a wide open invitation to everybody to join in the dance and celebrate life. Last week's gospel reading had Jesus breathing the Spirit upon the disciples and sending them. From that the early thinkers saw that whatever else was happening within the mystery of the Trinity, the movement within always prompted a movement out. Breathe in the Spirit and get sent out. Jesus comes from the Father and offers the Spirit – see how it works?

Today we've read Matthew's account of the disciples being sent, or being commissioned. In it there are clues that the way is not entirely smooth sailing. He says, "Now the eleven..." Instinctively we want to read the twelve disciples. Throughout his gospel Matthew has used the term "the twelve" so frequently that it has become a catch phrase, like the 'seven seas' or the 'four winds'. But by using the description 'the eleven...' Matthew has placed the memory of Judas' betrayal and the sudden awareness of broken community as stumbling blocks in our path.

We are to be encouraged, however, with the news that, when the disciples saw Jesus, they worshipped him. Yet even as we learn this, we are brought up short again with the knowledge that 'some doubted'.

If Matthew had not caused us to stumble and falter, we could easily mistake Christ's word as a triumphalistic church growth slogan. Mobilise the resources of the church! Unfurl the banners! Form the mission task forces! But the reader now knows better. Now we are painfully aware that the church, embodied in these disciples, possesses no resources to mobilise, has no task forces to send into the world. No number of confident slogans, beautiful buildings, hefty budgets or mission strategies can mask the fact that by itself, the church has nothing of what it takes to perform Christ's mission.

And so we hear Jesus' words addressed to a diminished and broken community of disciples. It is to them that he says "Make disciples of all nations." It is to those whose worship is mixed up with doubt that he gives the charge to baptise. It is the very ones who "deserted him and fled" that he now calls to teach the nations to observe all his commandments. Where will they get the strength for this? They have nothing. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus told them - as he tells us, "And, surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" In this promise, the church, having nothing, is given everything.

And with these words, the disciples were commissioned to go out and to nurture people with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and into the communion of the Holy Spirit and dare I add, into the dance of the Trinity. In the end it is our dance as individuals, and as a community that people will watch. Are we able to join in, are all included, is this dance life giving? This is where our response will be seen as expressed love or not. Do we really live out that love or not? Let's get dancing and see!

The Word of Jesus is among us.  
Hear that Word.