

## BECOMING MORE OURSELVES

Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin  
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15  
Trinity Sunday; 16 June 2019

It is a joy to be with you this morning, And an honour to bring greetings from the Corrymeela Community, an ecumenical Christian community dedicated to the work of peace and reconciliation on this island. When the Dean's Vicar extended the invitation to come and preach at Christ Church on this Trinity Sunday, I was delighted – and relieved that she was not asking me to preach on the Trinity. For that is a difficult topic, one all too perfect to assign to a visiting preacher. A hard subject to wrap one's mind around; harder still to put into words. Dorothy L. Sayers once observed that most sermons on the Trinity only make the concept more mysterious: 'The Father is incomprehensible,' she wrote. 'The Son is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult – nothing to do with daily life and ethics.'<sup>3</sup> Well, thank goodness, I thought. I won't have to talk about the Trinity. Instead, I was asked as the incoming Leader of Corrymeela to offer 'a depth of experience and a theological reflection on reconciliation and living with diversity.' Suddenly the Trinity didn't sound so bad.

### In This Moment

Nor so irrelevant. There is something screaming at us about daily life and ethics in the notion that God is God not in singular aloofness but in vulnerable relationship with others. The essence of being divine, the Trinity tells us, is to live in loving communion with those different to us. Pluralism is good, the Trinity implies. And there is something downright practical in the idea that God's relationship with us is not based on a static, take it or leave it yes or no pronouncement, the result of some a-ha moment that some get and others don't. That when we get it, we get it all. No. The Spirit of Truth – at least in this passage – is a promise, not a possession. There is more to come. There is, as Jesus tells us, only so much we can bear right now in this moment we're in. There is more about God to discover. Our relationship with God is a lifelong process of being and becoming. We humans experience life only in the fleeting present, but a present too often shaped by the burdens of the past and made anxious by the future. The only way to live as a human is within the limits of time. So isn't it amazing that the limitlessness of God includes a human life on earth bounded as we are by past and future? Isn't it good news that with Christ we have access to the eternal Triune God, that our little moment in time – bounded as it is – can be freed from the burdens of the past and our futures shaped by hope and assurance rather than fear?

But already I have entered murky waters and proved Dorothy right. I'm sure that the whole thing still seems incomprehensible and irrelevant. Except that as we look at where we are in this particular moment in time on this island in 2019, a God whose very existence stresses relationship with others and a God who walks with us in the process of becoming something new is the God we should be glad to worship.

Because we *are* becoming something new. Ireland is quickly becoming something new. The world is quickly becoming something new. That's what worlds do. Yet never before has fundamental change happened so quickly or so extensively. The digital revolution, the population explosion, the cataclysmic tipping point of climate change, the demographic shifts that fuel anxieties and flummox our governments. The latest calculation has whites like me in America becoming a minority in 2042. That's 23 years from now. If you don't think that a subconscious realisation of that is driving much of the populist backlash in US politics, then you're seeing something I am not. I'm seeing a lot of people uncomfortable with vulnerability. (Of course, if minorities weren't treated like second-class citizens, there wouldn't be anything to fear.) The date when whites become a minority in Britain is estimated at 2066. The date in Ireland may be sooner: around 2050. Now. We can choose to worship a God who welcomes this process of becoming, that holds these transformations of who we are in a spirit of hope and assurance – or we can insist on a god who wants to keep everything as it is, or to return us to where we used to be. That sounds like a god of fear and anxiety to

me, a god of singular aloofness, a god more and more irrelevant to the world we are in, a god increasingly incomprehensible to coming generations.

### **Transformed and Transformative**

A few weeks ago, a congregation came to spend a few days at Corrymeela. This was a congregation I once knew fairly well. About eight years ago I served as its vacancy convener, meaning that I accompanied them as they called a new minister. The congregation I went to serve was a typical Irish Presbyterian congregation in south Belfast: well-established, older, middle-class, white, dwindling. The congregation that came to visit us this last month was quite different: it was bursting with life, it was multi-national and multi-ethnic, working-class and middle-class, younger (much younger), and growing rapidly in challenging and disruptive ways. The new minister they called seven years ago saw that the area around the church was changing (had changed), that it was no longer a predominantly white, middle-class, or English-speaking part of town. There was a large Iranian population nearby, so the church started translating much of its service into Farsi. That accommodation encouraged other newcomers to join, so that the congregation now has an impressive mix of nationalities represented each Sunday: Guyanese, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Mongolian, Korean. Recently, they amalgamated with the local church for the deaf, so that the service now includes sign language along with Farsi and English, and other translations of the original Greek and Hebrew.

This congregation's welcome of these new populations has utterly transformed it. Some could argue that the church I knew eight years ago – that older, whiter, middle-class, well-established, *dying* church – did what a dying Christian church should do: it died. And then it resurrected into something new, and fuller, and more itself. It has remained faithful not to a god who preserves things as they are, but to a God who remains with us as we become more ourselves. Wonderfully, that church we met at Corrymeela this last month is closer to the original church of Pentecost than any church I've ever witnessed. Lively, multilingual, multi-ethnic, joyful, infectious. Deeply impressive and refreshingly relevant to the millennials at Corrymeela who aren't used to associating Christianity with radical inclusion or transformative love. The radical inclusion and transformative love we see at work in this place today.

This congregation has managed to get at the heart of something the Trinity tells us is true: that we cannot stay static in our sense of self – that to be truly ourselves, we must change and accept the process of becoming. After all, Christianity is about transformation: transformation of the self, transformation of society. We must expect the Spirit of Truth to arrive just as Jesus said: over time, through a process of ongoing revelation – not all at once so as to be cemented down in a single form by a chosen few. No. The church remains more visibly the church as it consistently applies an eternal truth in surprising ways to a changing world – trusting in each moment that whatever is true and eternal and good and right will live on, will resurrect even as our institutional bodies may be laid to rest.

### **Continue to Be**

Much of the work of reconciliation is coming to peace with this task of faith. That to be faithful is to trust that I can let go of what I once knew, of what I insisted was right, I can let go of my way of doing things, and who I decided I was – because I can trust through Christ that what lies ahead and what will remain will still be in keeping with the God who was and who is and who is to come. That a Europe or an America or an Ireland where being a white, straight Christian male is no longer an advantage will be still a Europe or an America or an Ireland that I will want to be a part of; that what is good and right and true and eternal will still be found – not because I fought to preserve it – but because it is good and right and true and eternal. And doesn't need my protection. It is of a God who will continue to be.

A Triune God who will continue to be – no matter how many sermons try to explain it -- a mystery, but who will continue to be essential to our daily life and our ethics because our daily life and our ethics are about how divine we can be in our vulnerable relationships with one another, in our willingness to become more and more ourselves.

In the name of the Creator, and the Christ, and the Holy Spirit: one God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), p. 22.