

## **Sermon 26 May 2013 - "The trinity and human rights"**

**Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT**

**Gregor Henderson**

**Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15**

On a clear wintry night, the stars shine superbly, and if you can take the time to wait in the dark for a few minutes there are thousands and thousands of stars to be seen. The writer of Psalm 8 loved the night sky, seeing it as reflecting the glory of God and God's creation: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

What always strikes me with this beautiful psalm is how it immediately goes on from God's glorious creation to contemplate the place God has given to human beings. "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them?" The psalmist realises that God has generated men and women as the pinnacle of creation, granting them dignity and self-esteem – "you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour".

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we focus on that most mysterious and most other-worldly doctrine of the Christian faith. God is three yet God is one. Notice how each person of the trinity confers honour and dignity on human beings:

- God the Father creates women and men in his own image, according to Genesis, and in each of the creation accounts in Genesis men and women are the highpoint of God's creation. Psalm 8 continues that theme.
- God the Son takes on human form, becomes incarnate as a human being. Jesus identifies fully with us throughout his ministry, treats all people as people of worth. Here God is clearly confirming the high status of human beings within creation.
- God the Holy Spirit is God's gift of himself to be with human beings forever, always available with gifts of love, peace, guidance. Our gospel reading again refers to the Spirit of truth, the one who helps us see things as they really are and who brings to our attention the truth about Jesus, about the trinity, and about human life.

We Christians therefore have no choice but to place an extraordinarily high value on humanity, on human life and human rights. It's at the heart of our faith. One of my constant refrains is if God loves every human being, then we, followers of God, have no alternative but to act in love towards every human being too.

Unfortunately the history of church does not give us much reason for pride in standing up for human rights. You only have to think of the inquisition, the crusades, many centuries of support for slavery, discrimination against women, paternalism, the church's role in the stolen generation, in adoptions of children born outside marriage, our self-righteousness over so many issues. No wonder the church has become a frequent apologist in recent decades.

Yet the fact is that the Christian faith stands strongly against anything which degrades or devalues human life – against prejudice, against oppression, against sexism, against pornography, terrorism, murder, cruelty, capital punishment, domestic violence, abuse of drugs. And we stand for those things which lift up human life, for freedom and hope, for education, for cultural development, for generosity and unselfishness, for the relief of suffering and pain, for the well-being of everyone, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for justice and peace. And thankfully, the church has a pretty good record in providing services in education, health, welfare – in schooling, hospitals and clinics, in community services, in rehabilitation, in pastoral care, in overseas aid, in advocacy for peace and justice in community, nation and across the world. And all these efforts are rooted in our understanding of God the holy trinity, the unconditional unceasing lover of humanity.

A few years ago the national Assembly of our church adopted a statement on human rights titled "Dignity in Humanity – recognising Christ in every person". The very first sentence of this 4-page statement refers to the trinity – "The Uniting Church in Australia believes that human beings are created in the image of God who is three persons in open, joyful interaction". Clause 2 declares that the church "believes that every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God's children". The statement goes on to express support for human rights and for the national and international institutions that support human rights – notably for the United Nations, its charter and the various international treaties supporting the rights of people.

In a week when the world has seen racism raise its ugly head yet again, in Sweden of all places, and in more than one of our football codes; when we've witnessed appalling personal violence in broad daylight on the streets of London; and when we've begun an important discussion launched by President Obama on the ethics of remote-controlled warfare - it's illuminating to come to Trinity Sunday, and to recognise that alongside all the mystery and incomprehensibility of the doctrine of the trinity, nevertheless one of the simplest and most significant aspects of our Trinitarian faith is God's profound valuing of human life, human well-being and human rights.

To the glory of God, Amen.