

Hymns: **106** “God whose almighty word”
 383 “Holy Spirit, gift bestower” (suggest tune Blaenwern)
 9 “Hail! Holy, holy, holy Lord!”
 477 “Teach me to dance”
 564 “O thou who camest from above”

Readings: **Isaiah 6.1-8**
 Psalm 29
 John 3.1-17

“Longing for God”

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Isaiah says: ‘...Seraphs were in attendance above the Lord of hosts, each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and they said ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. ... the pivots of the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house was full of smoke!!

This is Trinity Sunday, having moved through the Easter season and Pentecost, today we consider the full nature of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Fire and shaking columns and smoke and angels.

Some years ago on this Sunday I was going to take an all-age service in south Leicester – worship leaders were making little prayer shapes in triangles, there were children's activities to be shown at the end of the service, and etc.

And I had done something unusual for me – I had baked a cake. I do not have a light touch with baking, so this was an event.

I was going to do some sort of children’s talk about the three ingredients flour, eggs, sugar - being stirred together and all being in the cake, but all being essentially cake, though still flour, eggs, sugar. Ill advised, and maybe even heretical, but there I was.

Except that I stopped just a bit quickly at a red light, and the cake – cream, strawberries – slid off the passenger seat, where I had perched it, and upside down onto the floor of my car.

And suddenly the air in the car was full of words loud enough indeed to shake the windows, rattle the foundations of the road and pavement - and I was saying them. Not quite the angels in Isaiah's temple.

I got to the church, picked up the bits of cake – the steward met me at the door, and sized up the situation pretty quickly, took the cake away and did something with more cream that made it look cake-like again... and we went on with the service.

You should be reassured that today I have no cake, and only one point: meditating on the trinity will correct an error of emphasis the church has made over the centuries.

Learning more of who God is –three in one in relationship - will liberate us from some of the practices which have made the good news seem stale in our culture today – will get us back on course for knowing what it is we want to say to the world about God.

If the worldwide reaction to Bishop Michael Curry's preaching at a little wedding down the road teaches us anything, it is that the hunger for God, the longing for purpose and meaning – identity and love – is alive and well today.

There is nothing new here – Thomas Traherne, a seventeenth century divine wrote: "I have found that things unknown have a secret influence on the soul, and like the centre of the earth unseen violently attract it. As iron is at some distance drawn by a lodestone (magnet), there being some invisible communication between them... Do you not feel yourself drawn with the expectation and desire of some Great Thing?"

Both of our Scripture readings are humdingers today – the stories of Isaiah's call, and this passage from chapter three of John, so familiar.

Both of these passages are about God speaking to humanity about the nature of God - carry implicit instructions about how to approach our faith in God, and I'm drawing on both as I think about the Trinity today.

Let's pause a moment and remember what we are talking about, the three faces of our God. Not three different Gods, but all involved, included from the first moments of creation and before – so that the intimacy of Jesus who walked among us and listened to our whinges about cake and cars was always included in the vast creative force that moved over the face of the deep; that the urgency of wisdom calling in the public square in Jesus' teaching, and in the presence of the Spirit. Scripture gives a wealth of pictures of what God might be like -

And remember, this is the image of God that is written into each of us. Understanding who God is will help us understand ourselves, and our own longings – it will help us understand and respond to the hunger, the drives that humanity has.

I remind myself of a verse from the book of Job: Can you fathom the mystery of God, or attain the limits of the Almighty?

Well, many theologians have tried – seven ecumenical councils in the first four hundred years of our church and beyond to write our creeds – one is up behind me -

carefully controlling and qualifying and arguing over the meanings of words about the 'persons' of God, and their relationship.

Sometimes where they have disagreed our whole history has changed – as with the division between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman church over a thousand years ago.

And basically after our great church thinker Augustine, we settled into thinking about the trinity mostly in terms of its relationships – not so much argument about the origins of the three elements, which came first, etc.

What we get that the three are one and each is involved in each other's being and work – their functions and persons can't be divided and there are Greek words to describe it - though we usually talk about love as coming from the father, through the Son, by the Spirit -

That's what our tradition gives us, and what they'll teach you in academies of theological learning. Technical language, like what an engineer would use talking about components, or a doctor, etc. – technical language, but still talking about the same things my cake was trying to get at.

As far as livening up our spirituality, cake other than mine has the advantage of being edible, but I don't think it entirely solved the mystery of God's self any better.

We know the Gospels well enough to know that Jesus didn't require massive cleverness among the people he loved, (though some of those he has loved have been massively clever,) and Jesus didn't treat them like stupid children either.

It's not just that we aren't clever enough – it is that the trinity is something we aren't used to – a mystery.

I find myself like Nicodemus in the night with Jesus looking for a rational way to proceed, and just like Nicodemus, being confronted by things that don't seem to make sense. Be born again, from above! And like Nicodemus, I need to be, we want to be!

There is a place for theological speculation – it corrects us, challenges us, teaches us - but its purpose is never going to be to remove mystery from God's self.

When we are baptised, we are baptised in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit - we are baptised, born again in the name of God a community God-self, into a community of believers, we are baptised into motion – into negotiation, into relationship. We are born from above into the community of Godself we usually name as Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Because our God is in motion, is not static and fixed inside but in community, Christian faith is all about our hunger, our longing.

John Wesley had his experience of the warmed heart 280 years ago last Thursday the 24th of May, and we commemorated it here. Great that his heart was warmed, as it made his life better, and ours – his warmed heart and the longing it built in him to spread the faith, to serve the poor, to bring the kingdom in every way has been a catalyst for millions of others around the world to find a faith in Jesus, and has built thousands of hospitals, schools – churches that have raised up just politicians, and preachers both.

but friends remember that God loved John Wesley just as much on the day before, May 23 1738, as God did on the day after, May 25.

And we have an answer to people who say they can't believe in a God who would let bad things happen, or believe in something but are not religious – usually when people tell me they don't believe in God, and I ask a little about the God they don't believe in, I find I do not believe in that God either.

There is a more important question for the churches to ask the public sphere, and here the good news has ever been stale: not 'are you religious,' but what do you long for? What do you hunger for, in this life and in our world? Do you want meaning, or justice, or assurance that you are loved? Here is the image of God the trinity in you.

People have longing – longing is alive and well in our society! And it is evidence against the idea that we have somehow become secular – we've become less churchy, and certainly less explicitly Christian, but the longing for something, the sense that there must be purpose – is alive and well. Sadly, it sometimes expresses in anger, or even in division among people.

Longing misplaced, and mis-led, can take us down some desperate roads. Roads of nationalism, or ethnic pride, or the kind of individualism that values people for only what we can buy and have to sell.

Look at the adverts on tv this weekend – garden furniture, food, drink – all preparation for some magical community of friends and beauty. An answer to the longing I am talking about. But having the latest garden furniture will not answer our hunger!

Sure, it will give us somewhere to sit, but among all our technical theological words, we also have one for the teaching that buying and consuming will make us happy on its own, or that the longing for God can be filled in any other way, be it national pride or ethnic identity: the technical word for that is sin.

'I am a man of unclean lips, among a people of unclean lips, said Isaiah.'

It is not that garden furniture or parties or nations are a bad thing – the sin is in a great misunderstanding that buying them or belonging to one is going to answer human longing. As if our well-being could be achieved by an infinite consumption of plastic objects.

We put some straggly little ribbons out on the gates last week on Wesley Day, with a question: Do you pray?

Not a direction 'Pray here!' But a question. By Friday lunchtime the ribbons were all gone – and when I got home around midnight from a wedding on Friday, a little group was reading the sign, and no ribbons left. Do you pray?

City Road has answered yes.

Perhaps following a Trinitarian God, the church may see itself more as about asking the question, what do you long for? And helping us to see God as the source, and answer to our longing. Not another bottle of shampoo, or new garden scheme, or whatever.

It is not just about us, or anyone's individual faith. Because of who God is, we are always going to be a restless people – Because of who God is we are unsettled by violence, we cannot accept streets where a knife is anyone's solution to anger, or where folk have no homes or children no school - because of who God is we want to share our faith, to communicate joy, to know ourselves forgiven, and to say there is a better way.

God will smile, and God will delight in us as God delights in each of us now. God delights in each of you. Longs for you. May your heart too be warmed today; may you feel that longing.

Glory to the father, and to the son, and to the holy spirit – one God, now and forever, AMEN.