



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

14 June 2020: Sunday Worship

The First Sunday after Trinity

Romans 5:1–8, Matthew 9:35–10:8

Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

'The Voice of Love'

'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.'

What is God's voice? How does he speak?

The short answer is that God speaks to us in the voices of our fellow human beings. First of all, he speaks to us through the patriarchs; through men like Moses, who in our first lesson voices his commandments for the Israelites. He speaks through the prophets, whose words were fulfilled when He addressed us even more directly, though the incarnate Son. And after Christ's ascension, He speaks through the preaching of the apostles and the writings of the evangelists, inspiring and empowering them by His Holy Spirit to communicate his word.

And so we hear God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, through a cacophony – or perhaps we should say a euphony - of human voices.

But each human voice has a very distinctive character; we immediately recognise someone, even if we can't see them, from their voice – it's particular accent, pitch, tone and lilt. It can be reassuring to hear them, even if we can't see them or touch them. Their voice makes them present to us in an almost physical way; hearing takes the place of seeing and touching. I think we've all experienced this much more lately: even if we can see our friends, family or colleagues on a computer screen, in the absence of their physical presence, it is their voices that make them present. Most of all, the voice can convey what someone is thinking and feeling in a much more nuanced and powerful way than their appearance. We can hear disappointment, excitement, joy, puzzlement, anger, fear or affection without needing to see someone. The voice can embrace someone even though they are not physically present. As the Succentor advised us when giving us

a list of hints for recording sermons: 'Use plenty of expression in your voice (you can hear smiles on the radio!).'

What then does God's voice sound like? The Scriptures never tell us what Christ's voice sounded like, simply what he said. His appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden is an exception. When she sees him and does not recognise him, mistaking him for the gardener, he speaks her name: 'Mary'. Then she immediately knows who He is and stretches out her hand to touch him. He forbids this, and in a way, it is not necessary, for he has already touched or embraced her with his voice and she has returned that touch and embrace when she responds 'Rabbouni'.

What was it that Mary heard that brought recognition? God's voice – a voice that tells us who God is, what He is like, what He thinks and feels; which makes Him present and unites us to Him in an embrace which is closer than physical touch.

It is, of course, the voice of love. It is this that Paul describes in our second lesson. It comes at the end of a sequence of experiences that might well describe those of Mary as she came to the tomb. He writes, 'we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. It is tempting to say that they might also describe our experiences over the past couple of months, and in particular over the past week: we have suffered, grown in endurance, character and hope - and that hope is one that does not disappoint, because, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. As Mary was caught up into Christ's presence through his loving voice, so we are caught up into the presence of God the Trinity through his love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, because God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God and God in him. Whenever we hear God's voice: whether it is Moses' commandments; Paul's words to the Romans; Christ's preaching and teaching; or the Spirit-filled words of the apostles sent forth to preach in our Gospel this morning, it is the voice of God, speaking with the distinctive accent, timbre and tone of love that we hear; a voice that not only communicates words to our ears but makes God present to us, and us to Him, pouring his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which he has given to us.