

## HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Date: Sunday 10 January 2016

Vision Day!

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- Happy New Year!
- Hope you had a good Christmas with family and friends.
- We enjoyed time together and down time just catching up on sleep.
- Thank you for all the lovely cards and gifts Kathryn, Sue and I received from you – we are very grateful indeed.

Today is Vision Day as you will see from the Calendars we will be giving out at the end of the service!

New Year is a time for resolutions, promises, good intentions and plans for the coming year – many of which last at least a couple of weeks! Indeed, last Sunday I was encouraging us to make bible reading and prayer two key resolutions for 2016 whether we are larks, owls or just coming to by lunchtime!! See the website for what I had to say about morning noon and night!

We know our church vision here at HTS – to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope ... well enough, or at least I hope we do. Today I want to take a step back and look at what lies behind even those important and inspiring words.

Vision is about having a glimpse into the future, it's about recognising where we have come from, where we currently

are and on the basis of both of those things, casting an eye as to where we want to be in the days, weeks, months and years to come. This morning I want only to look a little way ahead although I am conscious of some churches which are keying into 2020 and beyond! It all sounds a bit Toy Story to me. As a bear of little brain, I can only cope with the next one or two steps at a time.

An example of this past present and future thinking was brought to my attention this week ... you will know that as far back as 2013 we all became aware (I may have made us all aware ... week after week) that in 2017, the city of Hull would be the UK City of Culture. Growing up there I saw the after-effects of the wartime bombs on the city centre. Many streets had places where there were just gaps in the building – whole stores and offices had taken a hit. And because of lack of investment the ruin had remained and piles of bricks were still there for all to see. I promise I am not exaggerating – this is what it was like in parts of the town centre!

Over time, money and investment came and the city found a new hope, the possibilities of a new future. The docks were redeveloped, the city centre transformed and Hull City and Hull Rugby Football Club found a fantastic new home in the KC Stadium. All very promising and then the thought that Hull would be the city of culture ...

This week it has been announced that Hull is in the list of the Top 10 cities in the world to be visited. It's number 8. Alongside Reykjavik, Vancouver and others. I am slightly concerned that the list is put together by the Rough Guide

people ... ! But hey! We still have the past, present and future set before us and using the example of a great northern city, we have a vision of what might yet be.

I know ... you are wondering where all this is going ... I said I wanted to take a step back at look what lies behind and before our vision statement words ... and in doing that we are going to take a fresh look at who God is, who this God is that we say we worship, relate to, seek to serve and want to tell other people about.

The picture in Luke 3 almost uniquely in scripture gives us all we need to start off. We see there the presence of and the activity of God who is Father, Son and Spirit.

Father, we hear the voice which says this is my Son. We see Jesus submitting to John and being baptised by him at the start of his 3 years of ministry. And we see the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, visible, tangible, real.

This is the God we worship, relate to, seek to serve and want to tell other people about. This is the God I want to remind us about today at the start of this new year, on this vision day. And it's as we look afresh at him, God almighty, God the holy trinity, that everything else falls into place.

### **Father**

*A voice came from heaven: "you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased".*

There is something about this simple yet profound picture which is hugely compelling. We worship a God who

speaks, a God who relates, a God who initiates, and a God who embraces and who expresses pleasure.

This is the God we encounter right through the OT from the very beginning when we read in Genesis Chapter 1: "In the beginning, God ... created the heavens and earth".

In our OT reading from Isaiah we hear his voice again through Isaiah the prophet, the voice of the one who created, who formed his people and who says:

*Do not fear  
I have redeemed you  
I have called you by name  
You are mine*

And when trouble comes,

*I will be with you  
I am the Lord your God  
The Holy One, your Saviour  
You are precious in my sight and honoured  
And I love you*

There will be times this year when we need to hear these words again for ourselves. When we are not sure what's ahead, when we are anxious about a doctor's appointment or a test result, when we are not clear what's happening in our family or at work, when our confidence is shaken and maybe even God seems far away ... we can come back to these verses and hear them again for ourselves.

A number of years ago I had an older colleague in London. He had served God faithfully in the UK and overseas. He was coming towards the end of his working life and was signing things off for his boss. Something happened in the office – I am still not sure what it was – but when I got the phone call to go to visit him at home, he was a shell of the man I knew so well, he was a shadow of the strong man I had worked with for many months.

As we sat in the garden, he looking ahead pretty blankly, and just before I left him, I read these words from Isaiah 43. And as I read them tears started to fall down his cheeks. His brokenness and his sorrow were being touched by God and there was the beginning of healing. He knew these things to be true. He knew not to be fearful, that God had redeemed him and called him by name. He knew that he was God's and that he would be with him no matter what.

This is the God who speaks to us too. To give us confidence, to give us reassurance, to give us a sense of belonging and of security.

Here is the one who created the world, called Abraham and all those who follow him to be his people. The one who knew the pain of his people's desire to do their own thing rather than his thing. But who still in the midst of their wandering and failure and apparent rejection of him, speaks words of comfort, encouragement and hope.

At the start of 2016, let's remind ourselves of our heavenly Father.

*I will be with you*

*I am the Lord your God*

*The Holy One, your Saviour*

*You are precious in my sight and honoured*

*And I love you*

## **Son**

The second person in the picture is the Son, Jesus. He is the one whose extraordinary birth we have been celebrating over Christmas. He is the one who has inn-keepers running around, shepherds running in and wise men running about on camels we imagine to see him and to worship him with their gifts.

He is the one whose family must run into exile for safety's sake, who in childhood learns his craft from his carpenter father, and who gives the hint at the age of 12, of being unusually interested in the teaching of the scribes at the Temple when the family visits Jerusalem. He is the one who tells stories like no other, who performs miracles and brings healing to the deaf, the blind and the dumb. He is the one who even raises the dead.

In crucifixion and resurrection he is the one who dies for the sins of the world and lives to bring us into relationship with his Father as he gives the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus the Son is the one who is more important than his cousin John, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and who ultimately will make decisions about our eternal destiny.

Luke tells us:

*His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary.*

Churches are often full at Christmas. We are invited to send numbers off to the central Stats HQ of the C of E so that they can tell the world how many people were in church over the Christmas season.

I have always been suspicious about that. Not because I don't welcome the guest and the visitor – I always do and I am grateful that we have had so many this year. It's great to see the church packed and the singing almost taking the roof off. Please don't get me wrong.

My worry is that for many people this is all there is.

As I think you know Kathryn and I are members of a small group of friends in ministry who have been meeting regularly for nearly 30 years. Sue and I are also part of a different small group of leaders who meet locally each month to pray for one another. We met on Thursday. We had all had great Christmases. But one of the guys there said they had been really heart-broken this Christmas because of the words of a child as they left one of the busiest services of the year: "that was really great; see you again next year".

You see if the Stats HQ of the C of E are simply recording numbers of people who attend church once a year, we might as well compare it with the numbers of people who bought tickets for the New Year celebrations on the south

bank, or went to see the Christmas lights, or went to the pantomime somewhere. It's interesting but it is of no eternal significance or consequence at all.

Again, please don't get me wrong: I love the panto. Oh yes, I do. And the lights and the fireworks. But I don't get closer to God by listening to Jules Holland, signing Auld Lang Syne or watching Widow Twanky!

Hearing the story of the birth of the baby Jesus is great. But it's only the very beginning ... there is so much more to tell, so much more to discover, so much more to know about the one who lived, died and rose again for me.

And I can engage with him not just once a year but every week in words, in worship, in prayer and in bread and wine.

Perhaps another new year resolution for us along with bible reading and prayer could be being part of this worshipping community whenever we possibly can – if we are in the village and are warm and breathing. If the stats said that we were here together unless we are away on holiday or poorly, that would be a very different set of numbers and would tell a very different story.

God the Father, Jesus the Son ...

### **Spirit**

*The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a duck ... sorry like a dove – just checking that you're still listening.*

This is a very graphic picture. Scripture from the very beginning speaks of the Spirit “a wind from God or the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters”. It was the dove which, after the flood, was the bird sent out to find out if judgement was over and a new world order restored:

The dove came back to Noah in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf ... so Noah knew that the waters had subsided.

The dove as sign of promise and of hope.

And just as the Spirit descended on Jesus, so it's the Holy Spirit who gives us (his adopted brothers and sisters) life. It's the Holy Spirit who produces fruit in us – Christian character to help us to make a difference to the world we live in. It's the Holy Spirit who gives gifts to build up the church and make it fit for purpose. It's the Holy Spirit who from time to time gives us pictures and words in prayer to encourage us and assure us that he is with us still and has good plans for our future.

At the start of this new year, I am excited. I am excited that our Christmas services have gone well; that we have had lots of guests and visitors; that we have told the Jesus story faithfully and imaginatively in words and music for adults and for young people and children. I am excited that we have the chance to share bread and wine with those in the old people's homes in the parish; that we have courses running already (LYCIG and Alpha); that we have a programme and calendar of events for families, for men and for women and for children and young people.

But more than all of this, I am excited myself once again not just to know that Hull is in the news, but to know that we are focussing in 2016, on God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (creator, saviour and life-giver).

And my prayer is that as the year unfolds, we might see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day, for his glory's sake and for the extension of his kingdom. Amen.