

**Sermon preached by The Very Revd Victor Stock
St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin – Trinity Sunday – 19 June 2011**

The second verse of the first chapter of the letter of Paul to the Romans: 'This Gospel God announced beforehand in sacred Scriptures through his prophets. It is about his Son. On the human level he was born of David's stock, but on the level of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, he was declared Son of God by a mighty act, in that he rose from the dead. It is about Jesus Christ, our Lord.'

As early as the year 56 AD we have St Paul speaking the relational language of God, as he understands God to be unveiled in Jesus. The Gospel, the good news, is about Jesus, already by now called the Christ, born at the human level of David's stock, but on the level of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, declared to be the Son of God. This thunderous doctrinal introduction to the great letter to the Romans grows out of two things: human experience and what Paul believed he had been shown about the nature of God, that God is revealed, unveiled, seen and understood in terms of relationships, what more crisply we have by the end of St Matthew's Gospel so much later, around 90 AD. 'Jesus came and spoke to them. He said, "Full authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to me. Go therefore and make all nations my disciples. Baptise men everywhere in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"'.

Here years have gone by since the letter to the Romans, years of missionary expansion, evangelism, the founding of churches, and testing in the fire of suffering, and so, the doctrine of God takes Trinitarian shape, and yet is given to us in the language of friendship: 'Be assured, I am with you always to the end of time'. This is God as friend.

I've worked at Guildford for more than nine years now and deal every day with the language of religion, and although that might seem an obvious thing for any priest to say, let alone the dean of a cathedral, it's realistic to remind a group of Cathedral Friends that we can be occupied with any amount of committees. Indeed, at Guildford we have committees about committees, and any amount of management, and any amount of fundraising, and any amount of strategy, and yet forget that we are here simply to be attentive to that utter mystery we call God.

I worked for fourteen years in the City of London at St Mary-le-Bow. On Tuesdays we had something called the Bow Dialogues in which we listened in conversation to interesting people, the Foreign Secretary, the Editor of the Times, the winner of the Booker Prize, a number of people from Rabbi Lionel Blue to Dame Judi Dench, and many friendships were made. The person who invented the Dialogues, Joseph McCulloch, said there should be a church in which conversation takes place, not just preaching, to which I added, 'The Church is always answering the questions nobody is asking'. But we can say that in our human experience, our Christian tradition, there is conversation within God, the conversation between the Father and the Son that issues in the work, presence and power of the Holy Spirit. For the doctrine of the Holy and undivided Trinity is not some abstruse Medieval mathematical formula, it is the application of what we understand about friendship, rooted in our human experience and therefore so deeply valued to the utter mystery of that which we call God.

The letter to the Romans half way through the first century and the Gospel of Matthew towards the end of the first century, and all the other New Testament writers before, between and after, deal implicitly, if not explicitly, with what human persons have come to believe about Jesus, revealing the nature and purpose of God, and making that nature and purpose present by the Holy Spirit's power. Within Church and New Testament there is much history, some uniting, but much dividing, especially where Christian people become too explicit and too certain, and lose the God-given necessity of holy reticence.

Simon Tugwell of Blackfriars, Oxford, in *Ways of Imperfection* has written: 'The Church has known many different moods in the course of history ... And it is not necessarily in her "best" moments, when she is most confident and clear, that she is most true to herself. There is a kind of unsatisfactoriness written into her very constitution, because she is only a transitional organisation, keeping people and preparing them for a new creation, in which God will be all and in all, and every tear will be wiped away. When she speaks too securely, she may obscure the fact that her essential business is with "what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered the heart of man"'.

In England we were much moved by the glimpses we had of Her Majesty the Queen's visit to this Republic and to your President. For the British Sovereign, at 85, to come to Ireland and bow her head at a place sacred to the memory to those who gave their lives in the fight against the British Crown, that spoke loudly, and the obvious warmth, and we might say, friendship, between the President and the Queen was tangible, a friendship that can't just be produced out of a hat during the panoply and formality of a state visit, but has been prepared for.

The Friends of a cathedral exist for one purpose only, to help the Dean and Chapter in their primary and fundamental task of maintaining and developing a holy place, where the rumour of God can be kept alive, and through prayer and worship the God who reveals Himself to us in friendship is worshipped, is given centre stage, not overwhelmed by strategies, committees, events, management or fundraising. This is why each Cathedral Friend needs to make space in his or her life for prayer and for worship, especially for worship, in this Cathedral of St Patrick.

It is not surprising that large tracts of St Paul's letter to the Romans and of the Apostle's other writings do not lodge in the memory, for Paul deals with doctrine, with ideas, but does so often without the device of story-telling, whereas so much of Matthew and the other Gospel writers lodge in the mind because we have within that literature a tradition of deep friendships forged. It would be valuable today to pause for a moment to thank God for the friendships upon which you rely, that matter most to you, for which you're most grateful, and to resolve, secondly, because of these blessings, to bring others into the ambit of the Friends of St Patrick's. It is part of the Christian revelation that the language of God, where we speak of Father and Son and Spirit, is the language of conversation and movement, the language of descent and ascent, of incarnation and of atonement, the language of divine friendship. How wonderful, therefore, that we should be meeting to give thanks for the Friends of this Cathedral Church today on the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, the root and ground of all our endeavours.

'So the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet they are not three gods but one God, so likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord and the Holy Ghost Lord, and yet not three lords but one Lord. And in this Trinity none is afore or after other, none is greater or less than another, but the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal, so that in all things, as is aforesaid, the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity is to be worshipped'.