

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 4, 2023

Trinity Sunday

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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A God Who Can Rest.

It is really good sometimes to pause for a while and ask ourselves: what is that gives us joy? Real joy, deep joy.

There are plenty of things in our life that give us pleasure and satisfaction: time spent with good friends, going on a holiday, having a good meal, a lovely walk, playing with our dog. These are good things, we need them, they are an essential part of what it is to be a flourishing human being.

There is though something that can give us an even deeper joy than these pleasures. There is a word for this deeper level of joy, quite a beautiful one, a word that opens up a new dimension just by being uttered – the word is delight.

Of course, this word too can be trivialized by talking of ‘a delightful evening’ or ‘delightful weather’ – why not.

In its proper sense, however, delight is found in things we have done so well that they bring about something uniquely beautiful, uniquely new, full of meaning, fulfilling.

You see delight in the eyes of parents when they hold their new-born for the first time, or look at her when she is sleeping, or on the podium when she graduates.

I saw delight in the eyes of our choristers at the end of the Alleluia during the last performance of Haendel’s Messiah in this church last December – if you missed it, watch it for yourself on our You Tube channel!

If you are a priest, there is delight when a word or an advice you give to someone brings them comfort, relieves them from the burden of guilt.

There is delight whenever you see that the help you have given to someone has changed their lives.

In a word, there is delight whenever you have given it all and you see that something truly special has come out of it.

Delight is not exactly a reward.

Delight is there even before the audience applauds. We feel delight whether or not the person we helped is able to acknowledge it then, or later, or ever. A parent delights in his or her child often without the child being aware of it.

The real reason for authentic delight is that we know, we feel deep in our bones, that something we have done, or been instrumental in bringing about, or contributed in creating is simply, exquisitely, unmistakably good.

Yes, it is the good that delights us - because anything authentically good always is a miracle. Undoubtedly, the upbringing of a child, the performance of a musical piece, the help we give to others require work, dedication, expertise, perseverance. But whether or not all this actually yields a result which is truly good is never guaranteed and this is why when this happens it gives us such delight.

Now, in this God is exactly like us – or maybe we should say, in this we are exactly like God.

This is what we see in the account of creation in. In the beginning there was “a formless void and darkness” – at the end there is light, water, sky, earth, two great lights to rule the day and the night, stars, plants yielding seeds of every kind, swarms of living creatures, wild animals and flying birds – at the end we are there too and everything God has created is entrusted to us, given to us as a gift. About each and every one of these marvellous things God has brought out of nothing he says: “I give it to you”.

And there is when we see it – to crown the story: God’s delight: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”. In God’s case though, we discover that delight has another aspect besides the realization that what he has done is good – we are told that at that moment “God rested from all the work that he had done in creation”.

Delight authorizes us to rest – the good which is now firmly established in its own trajectory can take care of itself, we can relax – we only need to wait.

Here though we need to probe deeper. We need to understand

- what is this good in which God finds delight, and even more ask
- why is rest so linked to authentic delight.

We need to do this because this might well help us to meditate on this most puzzling aspect of our faith which we call ‘the Trinity’.

We are not told that Adam and Eve thanked God for his gift – surely they needed time to take it in, after all they had just ‘woken up’ so to speak.

What was then the good in which God found delight?

Well, quite simply the gift itself, because there is no greater good, no deepest delight than what we find in giving it all, giving ourselves all – as Paul says:

Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘There is greater happiness [we can say ‘There is greater delight’] in giving than in receiving’ (Acts 20.35)

But then what about the rest – what does it tell us about who God is?

When you look at the tyrants and the dictators of this world, the Putins, the Kim Jong Uns, the Bashar-all-Assads, there is one thing they never do, one thing they cannot do, that is rest. And the reason for this is that they hold on to their power, they do not want to share it with anyone else, they cannot give away one single ounce of it because the moment they do so everything crumbles under their feet.

God on the contrary can delight and can rest because he has nothing to fear, nothing he holds on to: what did he do with all he had created, all he had done, all the leverage he had on us? He gave it to us: “God said,

See, I have given you every plant, every living being, everything you see” – more than that – he made us like him: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over” everything! What was his, the dominion over everything, he gave it to us. And he kept expanding this gift – eventually he gave himself in our power by dying on the cross, he gave us all his secrets by pouring the Holy Spirit in our heart.

In the face of our suspicions about how powerful our God is, we learn that he is someone who delights in giving, and gives so thoroughly that he can rest.

And by marvelling at how authentic and unimaginable his gift of himself is, slowly, with time, we understand something of who God is – because indeed God is not just a divinity that gives but he is gift. He is not a jealous, self-centred, all-powerful monad. Quite the opposite. God gives, because he is gift. Even before the creation of the world, God was gift. Even before he could give himself to us, there was giving and receiving in his life.

Instead of holding on to his divinity, God the Father gives it away and then he rests, he waits. Then a miracle happens – this gift comes back to him, in the form of the Son. This is a miracle because the Son could have seized this gift and used it for his own advantage – he could have “considered equality with God a thing to be seized upon”, as Paul says in Philippians.

What the Son has received is to be gift in his turn – so he does the same as the Father: he gives everything back, all of it, and rests, waits in his turn. This gift keeps being given and received – and remember, this gift is not just something, not just what God has, but who God is. There is only one God – but because to be God is to be gift, there is a giver, a receiver, and the gift itself – what we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this light we understand why the act of resting and waiting is the key: without rest it is not a gift. Rest means: I am not anxious about whether I will get it in return, I trust that giving is good in itself, that giving is fruitful, and I can delight in it.

So let us retain one thing from all this: believing in the Trinity is simply a way of preventing our projections to spoil our perception of God. As long as we think of a God who is one, alone, who holds the whole power, then we are right to be afraid of him.

The only way of trusting God is understanding that he does not ‘hold on to’ power, but he ‘empowers’, that he does not just give us something, but himself, and that he gives himself because he is gift, he is giving and receiving, he is Trinity.

And because we are created in God’s image if we want to know the Trinity we do not need to look any further than to our experience of delight: that good exists, that indeed it is a miracle, but that there is a lot we can do to create the conditions for it to happen, and that whenever it does happen, in the rest it affords us, we have a glimpse of what we are meant to be, of what being in the image of God means for us, and of who our God really is – simply, unreservedly, unapologetically gift.