How to be human Trinity Sunday 2025 Tom Arthur

About a year ago Marieke and I experienced our first and only Humanist funeral. It was for a good neighbourhood friend, a retired carpenter who was known all up and down the street, one of those people who formed the glue that holds the neighbourhood together. He would regularly knock on our door, or we would knock on his to check on each other and share an afternoon chat over a cup of coffee.

But this sense of connectedness was lost in what they call “humanist”. They had two songs played over the sound system. “Look on the bright side of life” and Frank Sinatra singing “MY WAY”, which is apparently the most popular funeral song in the UK:.

I’ve lived a life that’s full

I’ve travelled each and every highway

And more, much more that this

I did it my way.

I don’t know whether you have ever been to a “humanist” funeral, but we found it empty, shrunk down to something that diminished our friend and was meaningless.

This is my question for this morning: Is having it “My Way” what it means to be human?

This is Trinity Sunday. Instead of a lecture on all the abstract theological briar patch required to explain the Trinity from the top down, I wish to talk about the Trinity from the bottom up, from the human point of view. Looking at the Trinity from the bottom up will give us, I think, what it really means to be a human. That’s why the title of my talk is “How to be human”.

But first, I want to talk about God. One summer day when I was about thirteen, standing on a street corner under a big maple tree with four or five friends. I remember Linda Rayny saying, “Well, I’m not religious (by which she meant she didn’t go to church), but I do believe in a supreme being. Then I remember thinking to myself, "I am religious (meaning I did go to church), but I don’t believe in a supreme being.”

In church I learned that Paul in the Book of Acts had said God was that in which we live and move and having our being. In other words, God wasn’t a “being” alongside other beings that might be discovered one day by a more advanced telescope in the outer reaches of the observable universe.

Later, I learned that the theologian Paul Tillich had made the same point: saying God was not a being, like us, but the ground of being

From the human perspective, our God is that which is totally other, totally beyond us. St Anselm, way back in the Middle Ages, said “God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived.”

In the Bible, God is simply named “I am”, not really a name, more an assertion, and it was considered too holy to pronounce. Other names are not really names. Elohim simply means “the God”. Adonai means “the Lord”. El Shadai means “God almighty”, and so on. All these terms are human expressions for that which cannot be named, that which is always beyond us, majestic in the deepest sense of the word.

And yet this unnamable God is the same God that is incarnate in the person who, like Jesus, kneels to pray, Not my will but you will be done.

And this is the same God whose Spirit knits us together In community., So here we have it. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity as we experience it. .

Let’s start with our text:

Romans 5:1 (on screen)

We have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ,

through whom we have obtained access

to this grace in which we stand.

What kind of “peace” is it that we have with God?

Is this the kind of peace we are going to get when Israel finishes bombing Gaza to rubble and killing the last Palestinian?

Is tis the kind of peace we get when Iran, having used p the last of its missiles, agrees to an unconditional surrender?

Is this the kind of peace we get when our noisy neighbour finally turns off their loud, annoying music at 2 in the morning?

Is this the kind of peace we get sitting alone on a quiet mountain-top, transported by the view, far away from life’s responsibilities?

Is this the kind of peace I get when I finally have it My Way?

Of course not. In Greek, the word for “peace” is a JOINED-UP thing, the kind of peace we gewith RECONCILIATION, like what we do when we “Make peace with someone".

How do we get this peace?

A friend of mine back home has a very difficult daughter - alcohol, drugs, failed relationships. He had a Christmas card from her last December. She wrote that his unconditional love was the only thing that gave her peace.

When we are down and out, such affirmation is important. In our human condition we are fragile and flawed individuals in a chaotic world. Is it the unconditional love of this one man, Jesus of Nazareth, that keeps US going?

There may be others - there are countless others - who hold us in unconditional love. Martin Luther, knowing that grace needs to be expressed in human relationships, said we must learn to be Christ to one another. So, as Christians, we still say “this is the love of Christ” when we are Christ to one another. This is how it works.

John Calvin said the love of God doesn’t fall like the dew from heaven, but by the hands and arms of people like ourselves who know what it means to be human.

This is why our DISCIPLESHIP is so utterly important. You and I in or humanity are what makes the system work.

I have access to GRACE because of your unconditional love for your children, your neighbour, for the stranger, for your enemy, and for me.

And it is not only the love of the Christ that is in you, but the love of GOD that is in you, reaching out like Michelangelo’s God reaches out to the fingers of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel.

I have been alienated from God and from God’s ways but now I am found, I am saved. "I once was blind but now I see" - Amazing grace.

Richard Dawkins, the author of The God Delusion, objects to Christians calling him an atheist, when we are atheists ourselves. He reminds us that we don’t believe in Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, or the Golden Calf among others, though we may believe in the Lottery or Trident submarines to save us.

We need to remember that DISBELIEF can actually be important. Disbelief is a significant step in a maturing faith, Like when you stop believing in Father Christmas, for instance, when you realise it is your parents who climb down the chimney on the night of the 25th of December, sparking a deeper belief in the love that lives behind the Santa story, the spirit of giving and generosity that animates the human heart as a bulwark against the need to have it My Way.

OUR unnameable “God”, we say, is known through love as experienced, we say, in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth - through Liberation (from slavery) and known through Reconciliation with enemies, and must also be experienced in ALL those whose lives illustrate love, liberation, and reconciliation expressed in HUMAN ACTION.

What is totally beyond us, totally alien to our normal 'My Way' behaviour and beyond common sense becomes something within us, enfleshed or INCARNATIE in us, as if we had been born all over again, in the humanity of the new human being, the true humanity of those who have opened their lives to follow Christ.

Romans 5:2 (on screen)

We boast in our hope

of sharing the glory of God.

What does this mean, sharing in “the glory of God”?

I think of sharing in the glory of God as sharing in peace-making love, liberation and reconciliation, whatever the cost. Where God is, is where we can be.

WHAT ELSE WOULD IT MEAN to share in the glory of God?

Every day I walk around the neighbourhood, going past the used car lot on Cowbridge Rod. They have this Landrover style Mercedes Benz, a Mercedes model M3 that sells new for £140,000 -on sale here for only £47,000: 8 cylinders, solid, powerful enough to drive all over the Alps. What GLORY I would have if I could only buy this for myself!

Yesterday was, Trump’s military parade, which only by chance happed to coincide with his birthday. It wasn’t exactly the 1930s Nuremberg rally he desired, but it was a great way for a megalomaniac to celebrate a birthday.

The GLORY SHARED WITH GOD is different.

Senator Alex Padilla of California shared in the glory of God when he was pushed to the floor by security guards and handcuffed. He is the son of Mexican immigrants, who wanted to question Trump’s homeland security secretary when she spoke at a news conference about liberating Los Angeles from socialists and incompetent Democrats and demonised undocumented workers as criminals and murderers. Thus disgraced and condemned, he shared in the GLORY of the God of the cross, folly to the world but the wisdom of God.

For Christians, there is no other glory.

So this leads us back to our text:

Romans 5:3-4 (on screen)

We also boast in our afflictions,

knowing that affliction . . . produces hope

The capacity to hope is from the point of view of those who suffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously taught us to see the events of world history not from above, as we normally do, from the perspective of kings and imperial armies but from below. Not from the predator, but from the victims

Those who are poor know how to hope.

The bereaved (as those in Gaza. for instance, are bereaved) know how to hope

The powerless, the meek and the silenced, only have hope,

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness live by hope.

Thoe who show merciful act in hope.

The peacemakers work in hope.

Those who are persecuted can teach us how to hope

when the powerful and the well-fed think there is no need for it.

Those who JOIN IN solidarity with the destitute, the refugee, the silenced and the ignored have learned how to hope FROM the destitute, the refugee, the silenced and the ignored. They have learned how to act on that hope from the destitute, the refugee, the silenced and the ignored.

This is what church is for. We hope one another’s hopes, our neighbours hopes and the hopes of the world, and learn from them what must be done to act on them.

This is the same way we make peace, when we begin each Sunday’s service here by saying “Peace in our hearts, peace in the world.” It’s not just a nice little piece of liturgy. Unless our peace gets tied up with the peace of others, unless our hope gets tied up with the hopes of those who suffer, then it remains only the hope of those who will have “My Way” sung at their funerals.

But the church is not like that. This is why we pray the way we do. This is why we make peace,and bear the hopes of our neighbours and ACT on them

Romans 5:5. (on screen)

Hope does not put us to shame,

because God’s love has been poured

into our hearts through the Holy Spirit

that has been given to us.

Does anyone know the seven gifts of the holy spirit? These seven gifts lie behind the meaning of the seven doves of our Pentecost banner.

wisdom,

understanding,

counsel,

fortitude,

knowledge,

piety,

and fear of the Lord.

These seven gifts give us the self-knowledge of our vulnerabilities that is basic to our humanity. I don’t just mean the vulnerability of getting old and gradually falling apart as mortals inevitably do, who have no more privileged biological privileges in this universe than beetles and butterflies do or cats and dogs.

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I also mean how we are vulnerable to others, with whom we share such vulnerability. Our human vulnerabilities are strengths, according to St Paul, who says, “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Vulnerabilities enable us to build up relationships and enable care for the human community that have always been both the essence of humanity and the dwelling place of God.

Hope does not put us to shame., according to our text, without the hope instilled in us by the Holy Spirit revealing to us our true nature as those who are made to live for others, there would be no companionship, no community, no society or justice or will for peace-making or effort to combated climate change. There would only be MY Way.

The Trinity, from the human point of view, begins with OUR experiencing what is totally other and beyond ourselves, the first person of the Trinity that defines the human self’s orientation outward to others rather than curved in upon itself.

This experience leads to a life lived outward, for others, which is the Christ in us, or God’s word becoming incarnate in us, the second person of the Trinity, and it is the same spirit this other-directed life is what draws us together in community, Creator, Christ and Holy GHOST, as we sing. The Trinity shows us what our human nature really is and therefore how we should understand “humanism”..

It goes against the human spirit to sing about doing it MY Way. The key to the human mystery is that the human by definition, scientifically, biologically, philosophically, theologically, is not alone. This is especially vital to remember when we are being pushed again toward global war by those who want it “My Way”. In May 1946, Albert Einstein said to the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists. "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe,"

We are not made for getting our own way. We are made for life together. The first answer in the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism is “We are not our own”. WE DO NOT BELONG TO OURSELVES. We are made up of relationships. That is what it means to be human.

As Tate told me when we were planning this service, “Three are three and two are two,

but one is nothing.

Or, as a famous German theologian once said, whose name I can’t remember, “Ein Mensch ist kein Mench”, one person is no person at all. My Way is no way.

In Christ’s name, Amen