

# NEVER ALONE!

**Trinity Sunday**

**22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016**



On the night of October 19<sup>th</sup> 1984, Erik Vogel was uneasy about flying. It was snowing and his plane's de-icer and autopilot weren't working. Moreover, his co-pilot had been bumped off the flight to make way for one more passenger on the 10 seater aircraft. The young pilot was behind schedule and he felt his job was on the line. So he prepared to take-off, as he did most days, shuttling people between remote mountain communities in Canada's vast wilderness.

As the plane took off large chunks of ice formed on the propellers and then flew off banging like rocks against the fuselage. The pilot lost concentration, made an error in calculation and, as the plane slowly gained height, it clipped the top of a mountain peak.

Losing control, the fuselage ploughed into the ground and bits of the plane sheared off like a sardine can. Six people died in the crash. Meanwhile, four people emerged from the wreckage. They included the pilot, a politician, a prisoner being transferred and the police officer who was escorting him.

What happened next is recorded in Carol Shaben's book, Into the Abyss, as the author writes:

*"Each of the survivors was completely transfigured by what had happened that night, and all of their lives took sharp turns."*

The police officer recalls that, as he became conscious on that fateful night, he found himself buried up to his chest in dirt. Suddenly his prisoner, Paul emerged and started digging him out. Indeed, it was Paul, the prisoner, who dragged everyone to safety and then searched for fuel to start a fire to warm the injured bodies of his fellow passengers in the subzero conditions.

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The four survived. Larry, the politician went on to develop a remarkable career in international advocacy. Paul, the pilot, struggled with guilt and found it hard to find work. But he subsequently became rescue fire-fighter and ended up saving many more lives than were lost on that fatal October night.

Meanwhile, the Scott, the police officer, as he lay there injured on the bleak mountainside with his life flashing by before him, made a bucket list. Here he vied to become a good parent and to also obtain a decent education. So Scott went on to marry and to have two beautiful children. Meanwhile he achieved graduation from a university with a master's degree.

And the prisoner, Paul, faced court shortly after the plane crash. He was a rough and ready drifter who had had experienced nothing but hard luck all his life. And when the judge heard his story Paul was exonerated from all charges. Suddenly this vagabond, this knockabout, became a hero. Paul's life, too, changed forever.

The four men not only experienced tumultuous changes in their lives, they also became very close. Extraordinary bonds were formed as the politician's daughter observed:

*"Paul, this scruffy drifter, would arrive unannounced. No matter how busy my father's schedule was, he always had time for Paul. My dad would talk about these meetings with delight and obvious affection. Their relationship was important to him in a way I never fully understood. He cared deeply about how Paul's life was progressing and worried during his long absences, as a father would for an itinerant son."*

Friends, the truth of the matter is that we are all made to be social creatures. We all are made for community. We are all at our best when we cooperate. We experience healing, growth and success when we collaborate. Just think about the number of programs there are on radio and television that focus on family, that centre on community life and concentrate on being together in one way or another.

Blue Hills, that wonderful radio series written by Gwen Meredith, is an outstanding example. Focusing on the lives of families in a typical Australian country town called Tanimbla, the 15 minute presentation broadcast each week day on the ABC, ran for 27 years with an incredible total of 5,794 episodes. It was compulsive listening for many.

Then there was the bawdy Number 96. Set in the rough and tumble of an eastern suburbs apartment block in Sydney, this television series was loosely modelled on the well-known British sit-com, Coronation Street. And there was The Sullivans, a program focussing on the nostalgic world of war time Melbourne together with A Country Practice, a delightful series based on life in a rural community and filmed in nearby Pitt Town on the Hawkesbury.

In more recent years there has been Neighbours, Home and Away, East Enders and the unrivalled Friends. The list goes on!

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But more than just being social creatures, the experience of engaging with one another is vitally important to our growth and development. Indeed, the onset of a crisis accelerates this process and that's why incidents such as the plane crash in Canada have such a transformative impact on people.

For you see, crises shake our complacency and raise an awareness. Here we learn that we actually need one another. Developing bonds of friendship gives us strength and courage to go on. And so we encounter that story in Canada where four very different men helped each other survive a long, bitter night in the wilderness. No doubt there are similar stories when it comes to dealing with bushfires and floods in Australia or the horrific experiences or war in the battlefields of France, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam or Afghanistan.

Indeed, research shows people who connect with one another survive much better than those who are more isolated. People who rely on relatives and friends recover much faster than those who are alone. This was demonstrated by a sociologist some time ago when research was written up about a heatwave that hit a large American city. Aged residents who lived in neighbourhoods bustling with crowded streets, busy shops and lively restaurants made it through the heatwave far better than those who lived in a quieter part of town.

And you know, isolation, individualism and the idea that we go through life alone is not part of God's design. It is not part of God's plan. For you see, we are made for one another. We are created for relationships. We are meant to live and grow in the context of a connectedness that is mutual, encouraging, caring and loving.

Now this may surprise you, but this is why we gather in church each week. This is why we come to church on Sundays at either 8am or 10am. Indeed while the sermon may - or may not be - a drawcard, while the hymns may inspire us, it's the coming together that really matters. For you can't live, you can't heal, you can't grow, you can't love by yourself!



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This is such an important point. It's important not only because it relates to us. It also relates to God. Because, do you know that even God doesn't choose to be alone?

A matter that is often overlooked when reading the stories of creation in Genesis is that God created humankind with the idea of humankind living in relationship, both with God and with one another. In Genesis 1:26-27 we are told God created humankind *"in God's image"*. In other words we are made as an extension of God for the purpose of being in relationship with God.

Then in Genesis 2:4-7 we hear that God created the earth. And we are told there is *"no-one to till the ground"*, there is no-one to cultivate or work that which God has created. So, God creates *"ha-a-dam"* or "the man". God does this because what God has created is partial, it's imperfect - without humanity. In other words we are vital, indeed we are critical, to that which God desires and yearns for. Without humanity that which God creates is incomplete.

And then, of course, we read *"it is not good for the man to be alone"*. So God offers "the man" a partner and from this we build upon our understanding of such institutions as marriage and family.

But it doesn't stop here. God continually builds relationships. And we see this as the Israelites are chosen to be God's people. Meanwhile, following the death, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, God institutes the church, the Body of Christ and the new People of God.

And there is more. For the most critical point today on this Trinity Sunday is that the very person of God, the one who we approach and worship as God, also chooses not live in isolation. For while we affirm God is one, God's "oneness" does not mean God is isolated, remote, withdrawn or silent.

Rather the God we worship, often referred to as the "triune God" is a God who is, in the words of the African Christian, Charles Nyamiti, *"a communion of unbounded sharing."*

*"A communion of unbounded sharing"* - now, before you switch off let me explain!

The God we worship is the triune God, the Father, Son and Spirit. This God who is "three in one" creates, redeems and sustains. In other words, God is God because of God's multifaceted, dynamic identity made up of the Father who creates, the Son who redeems and the Spirit who sustains.

And these three "persons", ie. Father, Son and Spirit, are constituted in the form of a cooperative, collaborative, unity of purpose. So, the Father cannot exist without the Son, the Son cannot exist without the Father, the Spirit cannot exist without the Father or the Son - and so on.

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Indeed, these three “actions”, ie. creating, redeeming and sustaining, are bound together in a relationship of mutual dependency where each is defined and each is understood in terms of the other. So, the Creator cannot create without the Redeemer, the Redeemer cannot redeem without the Creator, the Sustainer cannot sustain without the Creator or the Redeemer - and so on.

Friends to put it bluntly God is a “bundle” of meaningful, interactive, loving, relationships that are gifted to each one of us - because this is who God chooses to be. This is how God chooses to act.

In more theological terms, we can say God is *“the communal indwelling of three persons, Father Son and Spirit.”*

Indeed, no matter how you wish to say it, the point is this - God is all about relationships. God is all about community. And, this means God is concerned about reaching out to us, God is devoted to drawing us together. God is committed to loving us!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if there is one thing to remember on this Trinity Sunday, especially as we wrestle with some tough theological concepts, it’s this:

God chooses never to be alone because God, himself? - or herself?, is a community of interdependent, dynamic, active parts whose ultimate purpose is to reach out to the creation in love.

And, secondly, God chooses never to be alone because God yearns to be in relationship with us. And here God is truly and fully God when we are in relationship with God and when we are in relationship with one another.

Indeed, God yearns for us to be in relationship with the other. God yearns for God’s people to place community and the practice of living with a commitment to mutual giving and receiving - to be our highest priority.



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**So on this Trinity Sunday, know that God never wants to be alone. And because of that know that we are never alone. For God is here. God is here for us. Moreover, we are here. We are here for one another.**

**In the name of the triune God, the Father, Son and Spirit - the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, the One who yearns for us and indeed needs us, the one who nurtures us and indeed transforms us, the One through whom and because of whom - none of us will ever be alone.**

**Amen.**



**John Barr**