

Trinity Sunday 2020 – Zoom

Trinity Sunday always seems a bit of a challenge for preachers, so when Toby asked me a couple of days ago to step into the preaching slot today, I had some reservations. The doctrine of the Trinity is a very challenging topic. The readings don't help. They are, of course, two great stories: the account of Isaiah's call and his vision of the court of Heaven, leading to his understandable cry "I am lost...my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." And the story of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night and learns the need to be born of the Spirit from above: both have much to say to us.

But not about the doctrine of the Trinity. And that is inevitable, because the doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the Bible at all. There are plenty of Trinitarian references. For example, the passage in 2 Corinthians:

The grace of our lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Or the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, to baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There are events like Jesus's baptism when the Son is baptised, the Father speaks from heaven, commending him, and the Spirit, in the form of a dove descends upon him. There are plenty of references to the three members of the Trinity. God the father, the loving Creator, is the subject of the whole Bible. Jesus, the son, is the subject of the New Testament, and in his role as the Word of God is certainly referred to in the Old Testament as well. As for the Spirit, as well as the Spirit's starring role on the day of Pentecost, at the beginning, in the Genesis creation story, the Spirit broods over the waters. Trinitarian theology is entirely consistent with the Bible but nowhere in the Bible does it ever say that God is three in one.

That's because it took a few centuries to develop the doctrine of the Trinity. And what was produced was very challenging. Many people will say that they don't understand the Trinity, and of course they are right. We cannot understand God, the infinite, the transcendent creator of all that is. We don't fully understand the universe in which we live; how much less can we understand the God who created it.

The early church needed to talk about God as it started to work out how they understood Jesus, both as man and, with increasing importance, as God. It led to great conflict. The first great split came after two of the early Church Councils, at Nicaea and Chalcedon, and the Eastern Orthodox churches, among them the Coptic and Syriac churches separated, because of differing views on the nature of Jesus, and, better known, the 11<sup>th</sup> century great Schism between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Western Latin Church, caused by a disagreement about whether the Holy Spirit, who the creeds stated proceeded from the Father, also proceeded from the Son. None of the schisms have ever been healed.

It seems extraordinary to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the ability to talk about God accurately and without falling into error really mattered then. To be guilty of heresy, something we don't talk about much these days, put your soul, your destination in the afterlife, very much at risk.

And we also, in our age, need to talk about God, and the Trinity enables us to do this. May I focus on two topics.

The church was intent on devising a doctrine that showed how we are saved. From the beginning Christians realised that our salvation comes from God the father, the loving Creator. He brings it to us through the actions of God the son, made incarnate in Jesus, whose life and death and resurrection are the actions that make our salvation possible. And we are enabled to make that salvation our own by the gift of the holy Spirit, who comes to live in our lives, and to enable the unity which is God's gift to those who are being saved. Salvation comes from God the Father, through God the Son, and is experienced in God the Holy Spirit; it's a clear Trinity.

And Trinity appears again when we take that most difficult step of all, and seek to look at the nature of God as God is in Godself. The great Christian insight, not fully shared I think by other religions, is that God is love. Consider God the Father, overflowing with love. Love demands someone to love. It is possible to love yourself but that is not a full expression of love. It is possible to love one's cats and dogs, but the love of lesser beings is also not a full expression of love. A loving God the Father requires as a necessity that there be within the Godhead, differentiated from him, another, an equal, who he can love. God the Son is the necessary response to this need.

And as we know love that simply exists between two people is inadequate, is too inward looking. A loving relationship requires that love to be shared beyond itself. God the Father and God the Son require as a necessity a third being within the Godhead, an object for their shared love, and thus the Holy Spirit is also a necessity. No other being is now needed. The stool can stand on its three legs. The fact that God is love, the fact that God expresses Godself in relation, necessitates that God has this threefold aspect. As love requires, each pair in the Trinity exists in mutual love, and each pair can reach out in love to another. The doctrine that God is three and God is one is a way of affirming our belief in a loving God who brings us salvation. It took the Church 400 years to understand this. It has taken it another 1600 years to meditate upon it and to develop it and to come to a deeper understanding of it. The process is far from being finished, and this side of eternity it never will be finished.

If we seek to understand the Trinity fully we are bound to fail. If we seek to talk about God, to say inadequate but truthful things about God, then the Trinity is the way we are shown to do this. On this Trinity Sunday we are right to celebrate our belief in a God who has revealed himself as three and as one.

Holy God, holy and strong, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.