

Trinity Sunday 2020 - Lockdown

Ever Widening Circles

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote, 'I live my life in ever widening circles'. And as I began to write my sermon for today I thought it is not a bad place to start with the Trinity.

There's an old joke that goes, if you don't like someone, put them down to preach on Trinity Sunday. But I love to preach on the Trinity as it is here that we see the foundation of the Christian Doctrine of God.

I always remember being taught doctrine by the Dominicans in Oxford, and the friar saying, 'Some people think the Trinity is complex. It isn't it's really simple. It says that God is about relationship.' And the meaning of life is love and love goes all the way up into the very essence of God.

Now importantly when we talk about the Trinity, we are talking about religious language. And all words in religious enterprise are analogous and metaphorical. They aren't actual. As the Jewish theologian Rita Gross says, 'Every statement contains a bracketed 'as if' or 'as it were'. Statements about God cannot be taken literally. They do not exhaust the possibilities of all. Rather, they are the best best that can be done at present by means of an imperfect medium. They have no inherent finality, no ultimate truth, no unalterable relevance.'

This 'as it were', she goes on, is vital, or we find ourselves addicted to linguistic conventions and commit idolatry.

When I was preparing this, I thought we could just open up Zoom and get everyone to talk about why the Trinity is at the

heart of the Doctrine of God and see what comes. It's one of the amazing things that when Anglican and Methodist Schools are inspected for their Christian distinctiveness, even the children in Reception are expected to be able to speak about the Trinity. I wonder how many of us would fancy being grilled on the subject? I have deep concerns about this because the Doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery which is not meant to be understood.

However, the imagery of Trinity is important because it speaks of a person entering a relationship of love. I've been interested in my Bowen work that the Psychologist Murray Bowen suggests that the number 3 is the molecule of an emotional system. The writer Mary Karr in *The Liars' Club* writes, 'A dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it.' And what we see is that in our relationships two is inherently unstable and we use a third to ensure patterns of emotional functioning.

How interesting that we find the three here in secular thought, just as we have throughout the corpus of theology through the ages. As S Athanasius put it "The Father is the Decision-Maker, the Son is the One who materializes, and the Holy Spirit perfects all the works,". Although we must always remember the opening point about metaphorical language and that there aren't 3 differing people - the Greek word for person *prosopon* has connotations of mask, so how we visualise and construe different ways of looking at a single essence, nature, power, action and will.

So what of the pastoral implication of the doctrine of the Trinity. What we see in the Trinity is contrast yet, unlike human relationships, without conflict. This mutual indwelling within

the Godhead seems of particular significance in this time of social isolation and spatial distancing. We have come to appreciate how our relationships are even more important than perhaps we knew.

Our pastoral work as a benefice is perhaps more important than ever, even as we have to move out, we also have to find ways to draw near. So I believe we can discover something of what we speak of in our Doctrine of God in our every day lives.

Here two crucial dynamics in effective pastoral care have been selected for attention — namely, drawing near through empathy and acceptance, and moving out in interpersonal challenge (also referred to as confrontation in some counselling texts). David Cunningham helpfully employs the term polyphony to illustrate the way oneness and threeness coinhere in the Trinity (Cunningham, 1998b). The chief attribute of this technical musical term is “simultaneous, non-excluding difference: that is, more than one note is played at a time, and none of these notes is so dominant that it renders another mute”. Or for the scientists among us, a helium atom is a society of entities: proton, neutron and electron all held together by atomic force.

(Cunningham, 1998b, p. 128)

It has been said that Reason, Observation and Experience is the Holy Trinity of Science. If we stay with Reason, Observation and Experience, we might look to Hildegard’s suggestion that the Trinity can be likened to a gemstone and its three characteristics of moisture, palpability and fire. She says that like moisture, the Creator is never exhausted, the Word is present in palpable flesh, and the Holy Spirit is the kindler of human hearts. So in our pastoral work we discover

the oneness and threeness of God as we care for our communities and model mercy and kindness, embracing non-excluding difference and building ever widening circles of true community in our midst. Now this is fascinating if you look to the Old Testament and note one of the words used for God in Genesis 1.1-3 is *Elohim* - a plural noun. *El* means one. *Eloah* means two. *Elohim* means three.

As we consider the Trinity and our pastoral vocation on this patronal festival of one of our beautiful churches, it is insightful that WH Vanstone identified three related factors which form the basis of true community: stability, sense of identity and cause. We see this in our Gospel passage, the close of Matthew's Gospel - as Jesus encourages community as stability, a sense of identity and a cause.

The Gospel of Matthew in this final resurrection appearance draws on the imagery of Daniel Chapter 7 v14: 'To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.' And Matthew also points us to see parallels with the Mosaic motif that resonates throughout the gospel. Here we see the disciples on the mountain in Galilee (of the Gentiles) receiving a commission similar to that of Joshua in Deuteronomy 31.23 and Joshua 1.1-9. Yet for Matthew Jesus is clearly more than a successor to Moses, he is also Emmanuel, God with us.

Now in parenthesis, as we think of community as stability, a sense of identity and a cause, it is only right that we pause at this moment and reflect very briefly on George Floyd's death in Minneapolis. This death is reminiscent in our country of Olaseni Lewis who died in hospital in 2010, his brain having

been starved of oxygen. He never regained consciousness after he was restrained by police for two prolonged periods of 10 and 20 minutes, at Bethlem Royal Hospital, Beckenham. Yes there are force multipliers in the US problem, but racism is a live issue in our nation too. I can tell you having lived in Peckham that institutional racism exists in who gets stopped and searched, and if we look to our Justice System, can we really be content with the Lammy Review of 2017 which found that whilst black people comprise 3% of the population of England and Wales, they make up 12% of our prison population. This figure rises to 48% for those under 18.

Really? At this time we are all prophetically encouraged to look at how we contribute to stability, a sense of identity and a cause in our society. To consider how to combat the scandal of white privilege as we reverence in one another the gift of life that we all share. And to consider how our personal silence looks like emptiness while others speak truth to power.

It is in this very ordinariness of life that we find the Trinity - through Reason, Observation and Experience. For in our everyday lives we find the God who became dust in the Christ, and who through holding on to the One who sent, means that through the pain of the Cross, God drew dust into glory (*after Riem*). Dust that isn't dependent upon the colour of our skin.

Now I know that for some on Trinity Sunday it is a real struggle to interpret the mystery. And I encourage you to hold on to the fact you aren't meant to understand the Trinity. If you think you do, I was once told, you are certainly committing a heresy. I think it's rather like Cicely Saunders who, when speaking of those who were dying, said 'people are not always so far away from faith as we think. Light does come, I believe very often, though we may have to recognise it by seeing 'signs following'

rather than by hearing explicit verbal confessions of faith.
Isn't that a wonderful phrase, 'signs following' of the Trinity!

So my prayer this Trinity Sunday is that the mystery of the Trinity will be known to us through Reason, Observation and Experience. That as we build true community in our pastoral care: through stability, a sense of identity and cause, we will create ever widening circles. Circles, not addicted to linguistic convention, but which embrace difference within the molecules of our emotional system.

As you discover the ever-widening circles of divine-love, may you wait to be drawn to know the Decision Maker, the One who is materialised and the one who perfects all in love. That is our tri-personal mystery of love.

To close, the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen responded to the question, Who is the Trinity? in this way:

You are music.
You are life.

Source of everything,
creator of everything,
angelic hosts sing your praise.
Wonderfully radiant,
deep,
mysterious.
You are alive in everything,
and yet you are unknown to us.

Amen.

TC Wright