

Trinity Sunday 2022
Sermon. Revd David Treharne. The Holy Trinity!

I was chatting with someone the other day and they said that this Sunday was 'Mathematics Sunday', because it was Trinity Sunday... when we reflect upon and celebrate the Holy Trinity, which for some is a mathematical conundrum.

We had a little smile about it all. I said that I prefer to see this Sunday as 'relationship Sunday'. The person replied "but Mathematics is all about relationships!" Fair point, but it rather misses the point. God is not a mathematical conundrum to be solved but a relational community to be encountered and entered into.

Passing on the Trinitarian Faith

As Christians we have a pretty important priority, which is to pass on the faith, or better still accompany people into intimacy and communion with Jesus Christ.

The task of passing on the faith to the next generations is a challenging one as we know. It's been made all the harder:

1. Due to people like me not being able to articulate the faith well enough.
2. For years the laity having being told that they should listen and let the clergy do the talking.
3. Every day Christians not having an understanding of who Jesus is and who God is... with Jesus being part of the Holy Trinity – God!

Whilst the Christian faith is about a relationship with God and not all about doctrine and theological understanding... it is still important. The Trinity is at the very root of Christian thinking and living. If we majorly misunderstand who God is... the undivided divine community of 3 persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God... we will misunderstand who we are and who Jesus is. If we distort who God is, we are in danger of distorting who we are. History and current events lays bare the truth of this! Does that make sense to you?

How did the Early Church get to Trinity? Stay with me now!

The understanding of God as Trinity didn't just come fully-formed from out of the sky. The early Christians had to reflect back on their experience of God and try and make sense of it.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn't found explicitly in the Bible, however, all the ingredients of trinitarianism can be found there. And a trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was the only reasonable explanation for the first Christians and early Church had in their reading of the Scriptures and their experience of God. The term Trinity was first used by Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian in the late 2nd Century.

The Unity of God is certainly there in the Bible: – the Lord our God, the Lord in one. Deut 6:4, Mark 12:28. This was the heart of the Israelite faith and Jesus' teaching. It affirms the uniqueness and oneness of God. The NT identifies Jesus as Lord and God without compromising the oneness of God (1 Corinthians 8:6). God is one and undivided. Christians are staunch monotheists not tritheists.

But there is also plurality of God in the Bible: There are signs in the OT that the one God is also plural, communal and relational. **Gen 1:26, Gen 3:22, Gen 11:6-7, Gen 18 & 19 & Isa 6:8.** In particular we read in Scripture that the Spirit of God is seen to be both one with God and distinct from him at the same time.

The New Testament writers just wrote about their experience of God such as at Jesus' baptism where there was a booming voice, the dove and Jesus himself (Matt 3:13-17), or the transfiguration (**Matthew 17**). They didn't immediately get to questions like how God can be Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, over the years these BIG Trinity questions arose that had to be addressed.

What happened next?

They realised that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah, Jesus was/is Lord, Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus is the Word made flesh... *IN the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was GOD!???* John 1!

However, they knew there could only be one God. So if Jesus is the Son of God—and also God—does that mean there are two Gods? They struggled with this dilemma for over 100 years. What was at stake was enormous... this new and deeper understanding and experience of God was challenging what they had been taught and inherited.

Since the age of the apostles, Jesus had always been considered divine in some sense. But his precise relationship to the Father had not yet been articulated. ***As Christianity established itself the person and place and uniqueness of Jesus had to be articulated for it to be passed on and stand scrutiny.*** It wasn't good enough to not explain the person of Jesus coherently!

STAY WITH ME...

Things hit a bit of a head in the 4th Century. A priest in Egypt named Arius taught that God the Father created the Son and that there was a time when the Son was not. This meant that the Son was a separate created being lesser than the Father and not divine. The Son was not God by nature, nor was he of the same essence or substance as the Father. Arius' ideas were popular and fitted the idea that there was one God alone. Whereas if the Son was God there was a potential problem of 2 Gods!

A chap named Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, had other ideas and a bone to pick with Arius. Athanasius said that only God could save humanity, and the way God saves us is by giving us of himself... a "share in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Remember what I preached on a Christmas...? God became like us so that we might become like him. Therefore, if God in Christ saves us, then Christ is God— he's not a lesser, inferior, subordinate being but divine... true God from true God.

The debate between Arius and Athanasius became so controversial that it threatened the stability of the Roman empire. Therefore Constantine, the Roman emperor at the time, called a council of all the bishops from all over the empire to settle the matter. That council was held in 325 in Nicaea, from which we derive the Nicene Creed. Athanasius won the day, and so in the Creed, we say that the Son is one with the Father... they're the same substance/stuff! Jesus is God! And God in Jesus became flesh!

A love story

Apologies if this has become a bit academic... and like Mathematics Sunday. Let's move back to relationship.

The Eastern church can help us with this. Their insight is that the Trinity is a community of relationship (Perichoresis) that we participate in. It is sometimes referred to as a dance between lovers intimately bound to one another... All creation is invited to be caught up in this divine dance and re-shaped by the deep mystery of this love. (The use of Father and Son terms is relational language.)

We have been created by the Creator to enter into this divine love. As Tudor said last week Jesus is God with us. The Holy Spirit (that is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ Jesus) is God in us, working deeply, powerfully and intimately in us to be in union with God and transforming us.

That transformation is personal. Me and God in the dance. Making me holy. Making me be the best I can be. Making me flourish and be fruitful. Within the midst of chaos, sin and death... I am transformed. God is working his divine purpose.

But the transformation is also interpersonal. Us and God. The love relationship is always extending beyond oneself to others. For other members of the church we are deeply connected branches on the vine. The one another's are a calling for our life together. And for those who are not Christians we are vessels for the love and mercy and life of God.

Definitely NOT Maths

It was and is important to get a clear understanding of what the church believes about God, but there is more than a touch of irony that in the process of defining the Trinitarian God... the God of relationship and community... that relationships were destroyed and love is resisted. The church over the centuries has paid a price for that... and still does.

Relationships are challenging for human beings at the best of times. At the moment they are perhaps a little more strained. Post Covid. Cost of living. Refugees. Divided political loyalties and anger. Weariness. Talking with other Christian leaders emotions are heightened, people are hurting and are hurting others, a real prickliness and strain about.

Pass on what we have received! Our gift at this time and every time, for ourselves and to others is to enter afresh into the divine dance, enter the mystery of God, abyss of love divine... a renewing transforming relationship. As St Elizabeth of the Trinity says...

O Consuming Fire, Spirit of Love, overshadow me so that the Word may be, as it were incarnate again in my soul. May I be for him a new humanity in which he can renew all his mystery.

Orient ourselves in God

God orientates himself around us. Through Christ and His Spirit he comes to us and meets us wherever we are. He is present. However, the big challenge and **conversion** for every one of us is to orientate ourselves and our lives around Him, not just for him to orientate himself around us.

Yes God as Trinity is

“a mystery that will be revealed to us in heaven.”

BUT faith is very inadequate if God remains distant and relatively unknown and not experienced this side of heaven!!

