

Trinity Sunday

Like all good Anglicans we acknowledge the Trinity every Sunday, and most days in between. “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” rolls off our tongue with ease. Yet most of us would struggle to say what we understand by three persons in One God.

As a theology student we were invariably asked to preach on Trinity Sunday – somewhere between an honourable challenge and a trick initiation ritual! A bit like sending an apprentice down the hardware store for “a long wait” and seeing how long it took them to cotton onto the trick played on them.

I was most grateful that at the time of my first challenge to preach on the Trinity I discovered the papal doctrine of The Incomprehensibility of God! Long before the Reformations, long before there was an Anglican Church, the Lateran Council of 1215 declared a concept known as the Incomprehensibility of God. Basically this acknowledges that whatever we say about God can at best be true in some ways but never the whole truth. A contemporary way of saying this would be to say that our best theological statements can never be more than approximations and metaphors for the true nature of God. And it is good to remember this before we begin to think about the Trinity. Our most sophisticated Trinitarian ideas can be no more than clumsy abstractions of the one true seamless, almighty, transcendent, imminent, mysterious, self revealing, unknowable God!

Part of our struggle I suspect is because some of the early conceptions of the trinity were very mechanistic or functional. God sent Jesus the Son, with the right hand, and sent the Holy Spirit with the left. In effect a pyramid with a hierarchical relationship between the three in which the Father was clearly the first and superior member. A little like our triangle on the cover of the pew sheet this morning! But look closer, it is not as it seems – the three sides join in less than rational ways!

Another similar model refers to the Father sending the Son who then sends the Spirit. A sort of chain of command. This is also a hierarchical understanding of relationship within the Godhead. The creeds use this sort of language because of the timeframe in which they were developed. However, a broad review of Scripture does not reveal a single pattern of sending, or proceeding. In different places Scripture describes the three persons of the Trinity in different patterns of relation. The three interweaving with each other in various patterns of saving activity.

So rather than saying too much about what the Trinity is not let us try and speak something about what the Trinity is like and what the notion of Trinity tells us about the nature of God and our relationship with God.

Of all the qualities and implications of a more poetic, fluid understanding of the Trinity let me name just three. Firstly the nature of God is **myriad and multifaceted**. It is difficult for some of us to grasp but we are told by Scripture that God the almighty omnipotent one who created all that is, seen and unseen, is the same as the human Jesus eating and drinking with dubious down and

out people and broken and bleeding like any one of us would upon the cross, who is the same as the Spirit of passion and conviction breathed into the huddled disciples at Pentecost. God is not contained or limited to single expressions of divine selfhood.

Secondly the nature of God is **mutual and communal**. Recent models of Trinity have gone back to some earlier and lost images such as *perichoresis*, a Greek word that refers to circling, as in a dance or like birds spiralling in the air. Such images point to community being at the heart of the trinity rather than monarchy, not so much an absolute ruler as a threefold household economy of grace. God who is love, lives in loving relationship within God's own self. A self that overflows outward to embrace the creation and seeks out us creatures.

Thirdly the nature of God is **movement**. God is ever moving in an intimate dance with God's own self, the created world, and toward us. And that movement is more like the fluidity of water, of wind, of dance, than mechanistic clockwork movements. This means that God is not contained or constrained by doctrine or theology no matter how clever or complicated. The essence of God, like the wind, moves where it will and moves in the hearts and minds of people all over the world regardless of doctrine, creed or ethnicity.

And if the nature of God is myriad, mutual and movement, then in a small way this is also our nature. As individuals and as groups of people we are myriad in nature. And this is to be celebrated rather than feared and judged. We too are designed for mutuality and relationship. Our hearts and minds long for God and for one another. And we too are movement itself – fluid in our thoughts and feelings. We too have spirits that move and need freedom to continue to grow and seek out God and each other.

If we understand the triune nature of God in this way then we will understand that we are called to live in awe, love and communion within the embrace of the divine community. And such an understanding of our relationship with God will speak to every aspect of our life.

In such an intimately interconnected community of divinity, creation and humanity all our thoughts and actions either reflect, celebrate and honour the rest of this universal community or not. In such an interconnected world it matters what we eat and how it is grown or slaughtered; it matters what others have to eat; it matters where and what we invest in – does it bring life or destruction to others; it matters who we regard as neighbour and whether we respect them in their similarity and difference and if we watch out for them; it matters that we raise our children and our grandchildren, our nieces and our nephews, to “give honour to all” and to feel empowered as well as responsible for their planet; and it matters what we hope for in our own hearts and that we pray for one another.

In such an interconnected world there is no room for using theology and doctrine to punish and pursue others. In such an interconnected world it is foolishness to think we can act in this corner of the world without impacting on others elsewhere – for better or for worse. In such an interconnected world we cannot hope to succeed and flourish if others too are not enabled and encouraged to do so.

I remember a dear friend who on the day she heard the news of some of the terrible atrocities in East Timor was moved to vomit. She then washed her face, took her purse and went and bought several punnets of pansies and beautiful flowers. She planted these in memory of those dismembered ones and as an expression of hope and solidarity. And this became her prayer garden. And then in the fullness of time found some more practical things she could do for her neighbours.

And so as we prepare to say the creed that binds some of us together let us remember that God also loves those not moved by the same understanding; as we prepare to pray for the word let us do so in the knowledge that we are praying for those others who belong equally in the embrace of God; and as we prepare to partake of the family meal let us remember those who eat other sacred foods and those who do not have enough of any food; for our image of the Trinity reminds us that we are most at home in relationship with God and all of God's creation.

The household of God is a household that began before time to make room for all creation; a household that gives up all and bears all for its own; a household that gathers around the table; a household that grieves any who are absent; a household that rejoices each return.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.