

Trinity Sunday John 3:1-17

Trinity Sunday comes once a year and it is to be embraced as an opportunity for preachers to wrestle with the concept of three in one. In attempts to explain this concept to children, clergy who visit schools would often take along some visual aids, one such experiment is to take a bag of ice, a jug of water and a flask of boiling water with the lid off to allow the steam to escape. The idea being to explore with the children the various properties of each visual aid, the solidity of ice, it's coldness, the ease with which it can be transported and held. The fluidity of water and its ability to fit in different shaped vessels but the difficulty of carrying it in one's hands, that the same volume of water can fit in a deep vase or form a large shallow puddle. Then the steam, always hot, impossible to hold, barely perceptible to the eye but felt and able to burn. This experiment lends itself to the idea that ice is like God the father, solid and unchanging, water is like God the son, taking on new shape and form as he became human, easy to see and grasp but difficult to control, then the steam like God the Holy Spirit, seen in its effect rather than in form, a burning heat and untouchable by human hands. Then comes the punch line, water ice and steam are all of one substance, namely H₂O, all at once it is possible to have in the room ice and water and steam all different in some ways but all the same fundamentally.

It's neat for an assembly, the visual aids work for the children and it's a tangible explanation. But as we grow in faith we understand that no human explanation can truly capture the nature and essence of God. If it could we have surely got it wrong, this is God, beyond human understanding, a mystery revealed to us in this way. Perhaps then we should just accept it as it is, this is the faith we have, we don't need to worry too much about the details.

But, of course we Anglicans can't just do that, we must question, our faith is based on reason, and in any case, how can we share our faith if we can't even describe our understanding of God? It is a criticism leveled at Christians by those of other faiths and no faith that we claim to worship one God yet that God has three persons. Either it is one God with three different guises, like dressing up, so when God is on earth he is not in heaven, that's one God. Or else we have 3 Gods that do their separate things and come together and have a chat from time to time.

That we claim the trinity is something different from both those things is where it gets tricky. Jesus prayed to God the father regularly during his ministry on earth, they were separate from one another, existing at the same time yet continued to be one and the same. In the same way Jesus tells us that he was to ascend to the father, both still existing though not on earth, yet at the same time the Holy Spirit is sent to work in and through the disciples so God is again at once in two places, yet it is God the Holy Spirit at work. Trinity is not 3, neither is it 1, it is the combination of both and that is what we wrestle with.

Now, you may have been wondering what the lectionary writers were playing at when they chose these readings for us today. There are certainly images of trinity that work better and arguably the best comes in possibly the most unexpected of places, right at the beginning of Genesis Chapter 1 from verse 26. This passage refers to God

as singular and plural. It can't be a mistake of translation as it's like that in every bible from the good old King James version, to the modern language versions. God says let us make human beings in our own image. Not my own image, our own image. God as plural is a concept written in from the earliest writings of the Abrahamic faiths, whether our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters chose to read it in the same way or not. This is not a text from a Christian writer attempting to strengthen a position on their own beliefs, the concept of God somehow plural yet one is already there, what has happened through Christ is that the details of that truth are further revealed to us. The Jews have the concept of the word of God and the Breath of God, this is not so far from Christ, the Logos and the Spirit of God, as we describe it.

Yet even more convincing than these observations from scripture, more important even is that God said let us create human beings in our own image. We are like God, we were created in God's, or their, image. What that must mean is that we have it in ourselves to somehow understand this plural person creating a singular whole.

Perhaps we see it in the relationships we create with the rest of humanity, we are all of the same substance, we are all fundamentally the same, carbon-based life forms, broadly similar but with our own special peculiarities that make us different. Scientifically we have our own unique DNA, our own fingerprints and in character we have various strengths and weaknesses that combine in different ways to make each of us unique while still fundamentally human.

Or perhaps we see the plurality of the persons of God in our own lives as we realize that we are many things, sometimes at the same time and sometimes separately. We can be parents and children, spouses and individuals. We perform these roles simultaneously and all of the time. We are many things and through our lives we will take on many roles and also shed some roles along the way, but we remain, fundamentally, ourselves.

You see, trying to explain and understand the trinity is only worthwhile if we use what understanding we find to move along our life's journey. To acquire knowledge just to say we've solved this puzzle is pointless but to explore the nature of God to see what effect that has on our relationships with others, or to better understand our own plurality or even to clarify how we approach God in prayer and worship, well that is infinitely worthwhile.

And that this is a puzzle and a mystery only serves to add weight to the notion of its truth. A God that can be explained away is no God at all but God who is, whether we understand this or not, should be beyond our comprehension. It has been said that God is three and God is one and that's that, that's all we need to say. The scriptures support this, our experience of God supports this and its mystery continues to draw us in and inspire us so perhaps it is true, there is no more left to say. Amen.