

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Romans 8: 12-17; John 3: 1-17

Trinity

“faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confusing the Persons, nor dividing the Essence” so states the Athanasian Creed, a statement of belief about the Trinity that emerged in the 5th century Church. Interestingly this was never found in writings of St Athanasius – a prominent leader and theologian of the early Church, but in the writings of St Augustine, another and later early Church leader and theologian. But if you were looking to Augustine for his further clarification on how the Trinity works, you will find one of his most famous quotations which states: *“If you can fully grasp it – it’s not God”*.

On Trinity Sunday we are asked to think about the One true God of three persons, the blessed Trinity¹ – as we sung a little earlier, or “three persons one Essence” as mentioned earlier. It has been written about a lot since, as theologians have tried to suitably define how best to make this concept understandable. But as Augustine has helpfully reminded us, it is impossible for us to understand.

Whatever image we come up with, whether that is a triangle – three sides one shape; water - as liquid, ice and steam; the Shamrock - three

¹ Hymn Holy Holy Holy

leaves in one plant; or even three churches as one parish - all fall just short of what the Creed asks us to believe.

Trinity and Church - Trinity Sunday

However, even with the illogical nature of the Trinity, which some have called an embarrassment to our faith, the Church still celebrates it. In fact, it is very unusual that the church celebrates, not an event, but a doctrine, or a set of beliefs.

We celebrate Trinity Sunday on the week following Pentecost Sunday, because that was when Thomas Beckett was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 and had said that following the Sunday on which the Holy Spirit has come afresh on the church, Pentecost, we should all be then equipped to go out and proclaim the triune God!

Incidentally he was made Archbishop just one week after being made a priest. That is quite a quick promotion. Now, God-willing I will be made a priest on July 13th so perhaps on the 21st July....

Trinity and Bible

A good way to begin thinking about the Trinity is to understand it as how the Bible presents the nature and actions of the one God. And this is in the Old Testament as well as the New. The Bible never uses the word 'Trinity', but if you look at this morning's readings, you'll see how Romans and John have been written using Trinitarian language

to tell us things about God. We hear about *Father, Son and Spirit* throughout these passages and in many more.

Being human, we do not have the capacity to describe in words and images the nature of God, and therefore the biblical writers have given us images which help us in our limited capacity to meet God, to start a relationship with God; this language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all there, not to confuse us, but to give us something which makes God accessible to us. The Trinity is not an embarrassment, and should not be seen as a problem to be solved, but as a gift to be received, or as an invitation from the incomprehensible God, to get to know Him and enjoy a relationship with Him.

Trinity and Relationship

Relationship is at the heart of the Trinity. It is a relationship of three persons who exist as one being in perfect harmony - a diversity and a unity. The Trinity is bonded together by love, which is the very nature of God, the key message of Jesus, and a fruit of the Spirit.

But God always intended there to be a relationship outside the Trinity, and not just within. Trinitarian language can help us to see how a faithful God, who, whilst remaining transcendent or divine, created a physical world and physical creatures; to then see why Jesus became God Incarnate *in that* world to invite these creatures *into that* relationship; and then how the Holy Spirit makes Christ's presence real within those who accept the invite.

Trinity and happy not 'knowing it all'

The Trinity also reminds us that we don't and can't know it all. It is human nature to want to know and understand things especially the great mysteries of life and there is no greater mystery than God. There are many people and organisations that attack faith and religion *precisely because* it cannot explain everything.

There are gaps in our understanding of God because it is not God's intention that we should know it all now. The gaps in our knowledge are healthy because those gaps make room for the indwelling of faith. The gaps keep us humble and encourage us to grow and learn together in faith communities. And what a wonderful experience it is when a group of disciples form a community in which to learn and grow together, whether that's in a Church or anywhere else.

Nicodemus was a man who realised he had gaps in his knowledge when he came to see Jesus. And when Jesus, with his dry, ironic sense of humour quipped, "*You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?*" I think he was both commending Nicodemus' humility but also making a clear point. That point remains for us: we can be close to Jesus *without* knowing it all.

Trinity and mystery

The Trinity then, is not so much as *our* attempt to explain God or as a barrier which prevents us from coming close to God - but as a gift *from* God, a way in which God tries to get close to us!

Our responsibility is not necessarily to worry about the details of what the Trinity means in words, but to allow ourselves to live in it by following obediently to what God is calling us to do. That might feel like being "*blown around by the Spirit*" and it will no doubt take us to places of great challenge but also great peace and joy.

Therefore, dear friends, we have an obligation, not to hide away from the Trinity but to engage with God *through it* in our life of faith. And if you feel bold enough to go and proclaim the triune God, then Thomas Becket would I am sure be delighted; or you could take an opportunity to invite someone into our triune parish for an event.

God and Trinity are indeed mysteries but they are mysteries into which we also belong because we are God's children. When we come together in taking Communion or blessing later on, as God's children, we will come as diverse people but in unity. We'll come as many bodies but as one body, we come as people drawn together by the Father's adoption, by the Holy Spirit's indwelling and by the body and blood of Christ. Amen

Revd Richard Haynes

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