

Trinity Sunday

Readings: Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1-8; Matthew chapter 28, verses 16-20

Today is **Trinity Sunday**. It is also *Christian Aid Sunday* and I think many preachers will be glad of any excuse for avoiding the difficult doctrine of the Trinity. I am not one of them. So here is a sermon on the Trinity.

I do not expect you to understand it. To say that God is Three Persons in One and One in Three is a mystery. I have great sympathy with the college student who retired to his room to try and work it out. He emerged two days later wearing a black leather jacket and scrawled on the back were the letters BAIK. Someone asked what they stood for and he replied; "Boy Am I Konfused". Back came the response; "You don't spell confused with a k". And the student replied; "You don't know how confused I am".

I am quite happy to let the confusion stand. There is a mystery here beyond my comprehension but there is a reality too. It is an attempt to capture the reality of God in one sentence and that reality speaks to two of our greatest fears and greatest needs.

One of those fears is the fear of being alone. We are social beings; we live in community and our whole life is determined by a network of relationships which define us. Years ago I read a book entitled "Real Life is Meeting" and it insisted that life only has meaning in the context of our relationships with others. When that network is non-existent or it is withdrawn then life is reduced to mere existence. I heard on the news recently of an old man who lived and died alone in a basement flat in London. His body was only discovered five months later. Can you imagine the living hell he must have gone through before he died? And imagine what your life would be like without family or friends and if you never had any inter-action with another person, day in and day out.

Is that also the final reality for us? To be alone?

The Christian answer is a resounding No. To be a Christian is to share in the life of God and the doctrine of the Trinity asserts that the life of God is a life lived in relationship. That's what we mean when we assert that God is three in one. We say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and believe that community is to be found within the Godhead. To share in the life of God is to be caught up within a network of relationship and I have a strong suspicion that the one anthem sung in the life after death is the anthem sung on earth by Liverpool football fans. – You'll never walk alone!

Now to the other fear that we have – the fear of losing our identity and of being swallowed up in an amorphous mass of anonymity. The fear of being a total nonentity.

That is the way life is going these days. We are rapidly becoming numbers rather than persons. I heard once of a census enumerator who checked up on a family and asked, "how many in the family?" The mother replied; "Well, there is John and Joe and Mary and..." The census man cut her short. "I just want the numbers, not the names" and mother replied "we are not numbers." And these days it seems to me that all the Government is interested in is my National Insurance number, not my name. They are not interested in Bob Forrest as a person.

And in the life after death? Some religions use the analogy of a Great Ocean into which are absorbed – one droplet of water absorbed into an anonymous ocean of water and indistinguishable from every other droplet. There is even a Christian hymn which says:

*"Till in the ocean of thy love
we lose ourselves in heaven above"*

Is that it? Ultimate reality is just an amorphous mass in which all identity is lost?

Not for the Christian. Nor even for the Jew. For at the heart of Hebrew faith is the confession "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One". And the fact that God is One distinguished the Hebrew Faith from all others. Our Christian confession goes further. It is that God is not just Three in One but also One in Three. Which is to say that, within the Godhead, there is unity and identity as well as community.

If all this sounds a bit complicated to you then take heart – it is meant to be. And if you can't understand it then good for you. You are not meant to understand it but to experience it. Which is how the first disciples arrived at a Trinitarian belief. Those first disciples were all Jews, believing fervently that God is One and there is only one God. Then came Jesus, and their experience of living with Him posed a huge question – was He just a another man? Only after the resurrection did that question resolve itself and Thomas voiced their new conviction; "My Lord and my God". Nor was that the end. After Jesus' physical presence was withdrawn came the Holy Spirit and they had another question to answer. Who is the Holy Spirit? The only answer they could come up with was to say the Holy Spirit too, was God. Three Gods? Perish the thought. So experience forced them to conclude "We believe in One God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

The doctrine of the Trinity is a transcript of Christian experience. It is how we experience God. You might not be able to get your mind round it but that doesn't matter. What matters is that you experience God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and when you do that you can sing

*"Where reason fails with all its powers
there faith prevails and love adores".*

(Isaac Watts)