

Trinity Sunday

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

Today is Trinity Sunday. It marks the climax of the Christian Year. For preachers it poses a huge difficulty. It is easy enough to state the formula. We believe in God who is One in Three and Three in One. But when it comes to trying to explain it the problems begin. For any explanation runs the risk of being heretical. If you want to see a tortuous attempt at explaining it just take a look at the Athanasian Creed which I have never dared to use in a Church service.. It speaks of believing in the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Spirit – incomprehensible!

So perhaps we should leave it at that. I like the story of the college student who locked himself away in his room to ponder the state of the world. He emerged three days later wearing a black leather jacket with the letters BAIK scrawled on the back. Someone asked what they stood for. Boy Am I Konfused was his answer. "You don't spell confused with a K" exclaimed his friend." "You don't know how confused I am" was the reply.

The fact is that we are dealing with an ultimate mystery here. The doctrine is an attempt to encapsulate the whole nature of God in a sentence and that it is impossibility. We, with our puny understanding, can never hope to grasp the full nature of God with our finite mind. If we could then it would mean that God is no bigger than our mind's grasp — and none of us could worship a God who is that small. So, rather than complain that we can't understand the doctrine it would be better for us if we rejoiced in its incomprehensibility.

The doctrine has a very practical consequence. It enables us to worship. All true and authentic worship has a sense of wonder and awe at its core. And it is mystery which alone provokes a sense of awe and wonder. What is missing from so much of what passes for worship these days is any sense of wonder and there is a complete absence of awe. We speak of God as though He were our best mate and there is very little sense of reverence or respect in the language we use or the attitude we bring to worship. Everything must be reduced to the level of understanding and the understanding required is at the level of a 6 year old. It's the kind of adulation given to celebrities and it debases worship. Trinity Sunday gives us an opportunity to declare and to rejoice in a mystery and if the hymns and sermon are beyond our understanding so much the better. Which is why I love singing:

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

There is another practical consequence of this doctrine. Its very incomprehensibility enables growth in understanding. I did Maths when I was in Primary School but they never attempted to teach me algebra and trigonometry. These were a mystery. They were an aspect of maths that I had to grow into. The point being that they represented an '*unknown*' which left room for growth. It is no different with the Christian Faith. It is all about growing in the knowledge and love of God and you can't grow if, at any stage, you think you know it all. The doctrine of the Trinity represents an '*unknown*' into which we can grow.

I have, so far, resisted the temptation to try and explain. But, at the risk of being accused of heresy, here goes.

The doctrine of the Trinity speaks of three '*persons*' in one and one in three. Three '*Persons*' doesn't mean three distinct people. And, if you look at how the doctrine arose you get a bit of help toward understanding. The first disciples, all Jews, were committed to believing that God is One. That was the core confession of Jewish Faith. Then came Jesus and those first disciples experienced Him as a human being. But they gradually realised that '*human*' was an inadequate understanding. No mere human taught and acted and lived as Jesus did. There was an extra dimension to His

being and, after the resurrection it was Thomas who gave voice to this. He met the resurrected Jesus and exclaimed " My Lord and my God". That, for a Jew, was an incredible thing to say. Nor was that the end. For after His ascension they experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit and that experience forced them to conclude that the Holy Spirit, too, was God. Three Gods? Perish the thought! So the doctrine arose. It arose out of their experience which forced them to conclude that God is One but He is Three in One.

Personality is a very complex thing. I am obviously one person. But I am a very complex person. I don't even understand myself sometimes. If you asked my wife who I am you would get one answer — and it might not be very flattering. Ask my children and you would get a different answer. Ask my congregations and I dread to think of the answers you would get. And if you asked the members of the cricket team with whom I played every Saturday for 10 years they would tell you of someone who dropped sitters in the slips because his mind was on Sunday's sermon. Four different people? – No. – It was the same me but people experienced me in very different ways.

Why should the personhood of God be any less complex? And I am prepared to leave it at that. I can already hear the charge of 'Modalism' being levelled against me but any explanation is tinged with heresy and I have to live with it. Meanwhile I continue to believe in One God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and I do so on the basis of my Christian experience, not theory.

But enough. We are here to celebrate the mystery of God this morning; the God who is forever beyond our full understanding but the God who revealed Himself fully in Jesus and the God who is with us in every situation of our life. I may not understand but I am prepared to give full voice and sing:

*"Almighty God, to Thee
be endless honours done,
The undivided Three
and the mysterious One;
Where reason fails with all her powers
There faith prevails and love adores"*