

Sermon for Trinity Sunday - 7 June 2020

Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Psalm 8; Corinthians 13. 11-14; John 3. 1-15

Holy Trinity is the second most popular church dedication in England, second only to St Mary. So we have Holy Trinity Bengoe, Holy Trinity Hertford Heath, Holy Trinity Stevenage, Holy Trinity Bishops Stortford, and so on.

If your church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity, you can guarantee your Patronal Festival will be on a Sunday in the summer – apart from that there are drawbacks. The Vicar can't dress up as the Holy Trinity for the church fete; if your Patron saint is George, or Nicholas, that's a much better bet (but dressing up as John the Baptist might be unwise). And it is hard to tell children interesting stories about the Holy Trinity, or have them act out incidents from the life of the Holy Trinity. It would be much better with Francis or Paul or Margaret of Antioch.

The Trinity is difficult – most of us will have more difficulty with it even than Nicodemus had with the words of Jesus about being born again. We can grasp everyday cases of multiple forms. Ice, steam and liquid water are all chemically exactly the same but look and behave very differently. Something can be an egg, a caterpillar, a

chrysalis and a butterfly and always be a Red Admiral, however different the forms seem to be; but thinking that way about God is harder.

And working out what the Trinity means, has been divisive between branches of the church in early centuries, before and after Constantine; and later between eastern and western churches.

The western church unilaterally added to the Creed the words that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and this was a factor in the final breach between the eastern and western churches in 1054. And it can lead to strict monotheists like Muslims claiming, mockingly, that Christians worship three gods.

The Trinity is difficult.

Some preachers cheat a bit, like St Patrick by waving a shamrock - or a three-legged stool (three is the minimum number of legs for a stable seat).

And, for some time, Christian writers just ignored the Trinity, or pretended it was only really an issue for academic theologians, and got on with more exciting topics.

But mankind has an enquiring mind – it is one of the things that makes us human, and one of the things that

builds science and civilisation. Anyone who thinks about God may want to know more about God's nature.

In Psalm 8, the Psalmist wonders what God thinks about mankind: "What are mortals that you should be mindful of them; mere human beings that you should seek them out. You have made them little lower than the angels; and crown them with glory and honour." And, I suppose, the doctrine of the Trinity comes from what mankind thinks about God; from wondering and speculating on what God is really like, how God exists and works and is revealed.

How is God revealed to us? How does God make himself known? How do we encounter God? As God who created the universe and continues to care about it, whom we may call God the creator, the Father, the first person of the Trinity. As God who as Jesus Christ came into the world as a human being and shared the life of mankind and died and rose again, whom we may call God the redeemer, the Son, the second person of the Trinity. As God who through the spirit supports and inspires the church, whom we may call God the sustainer, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not set out in the Bible – the only absolutely specific references are the last words of Matthew's Gospel - baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;

and Paul's blessing at the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, which we call "the Grace".

But, of course, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are there. God the creator is there from the first words of the first book of the bible.

God the Son is there from the first words of the New Testament, and, Christians believe, is foreshadowed in many passages in the Old.

God the Holy Spirit can be identified with the figure of Wisdom, found in some books of the Old Testament, incidentally always personified as female, especially in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiasticus.

And in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus and delivered at Pentecost and very evident in the early church.

How, if at all, can this affect our daily lives? One fascinating exercise is to see the working of the Trinity as a model for human organisation. The Trinity is sometimes portrayed as an endless knot, interlinked, and sometimes as dancing together in harmony holding hands.

The Trinity gives a picture of co-operation without hierarchy (though we speak of the first, second and third

persons of the Trinity, this is not a ranking or a pecking order) and of working with equality, connecting rather than competing. This may be a true perception of God; or a human projection onto the Godhead of a deeply felt sense of how things should be. Either way, it raises our eyes and our aspirations to a better way for church and society.

Where the Trinity leads, let us follow. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit be with you all. Amen.

