

Rev'd Daniel's Sermon

Trinity Sunday 30th May 2021

A number of times in my life, people have shown scepticism and disdain, whenever I've brought up the Trinity in conversation. They tell me either they're not interested in such complex, artificial, creedal statements and dogmas, or that it's too hard for them to understand – so why bother trying? Often these same people have told me of profound, immense, experiences and encounters they've had with God – visions, dreams, epiphanies, huge feelings of overwhelming love. Why would anyone want to constrict those experiences of God by trying to pigeonhole him into a dogmatic formula like the Trinity...?

I have here an old map of Yorkshire from the 17th century; it shows the sea, the cities, the rivers, the roads, and the three Ridings of Yorkshire: North, East, and West – with York at the very centre. It's just a picture, an image. Certainly not as real, beautiful, or big as the real Yorkshire. But it's still so important. Without it, those 17th century Yorkshire folk wouldn't have had any way of mapping out the beautiful place they lived and experienced – the layout, directions, and distances of their home county would remain vague and abstract. They would have had no means of travelling the terrain, able to appreciate it in even greater depth.

Maybe the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a bit like this. Having powerful experiences of God and entering into the Sacred Mystery is wonderful, but it isn't good enough just to have loose, abstract, unconnected, and agnostic spiritualist concepts of God. We need the help of something more concrete – a map. The words to describe the nature and being of the Triune God we say in the creeds are of course illustrative and pictorial – like the work of a cartographer. But rather than detract from the Mystery and immensity of God, I believe the doctrine of the Trinity aids us to find our way deeper into the contemplation and experience of the divine. And, like a map, it is the result of the detailed efforts of countless explorers – men and women of God that have delved into the experience and contemplation of him.

The fact that it is human made does not matter in the slightest. Creating names and titles and images for God is something humans have been doing since we first had the cognitive capacity to recognise the numinous.

All throughout the Bible, people are creating names and titles for God. El Shaddai (God Almighty), El Elyon (God Most High), El Olam (Everlasting God); the Psalmist calls him the 'Rider in the Heavens'; Daniel the 'Ancient of Days'; David the 'Strong One... the Rock of Israel'. Hagar, the wrongly treated concubine of Abraham, is the first person in Scripture to give God a name; she calls him El Roi (God Who Sees). After everyone had neglected this innocent Egyptian slave girl, casting her out with her baby Ishmael into the wilderness, it was God alone that cared for her, that saw her. All of these names and titles, despite being human made, are evocative and powerful images that lead us to that greater contemplation and experience of God.

And, toward the end of the great biblical narrative, Jesus the Incarnate God, teaches us to call God Abba. We come full circle from God Who Sees, to God our Father. The God who loves and cares for us as his children. Our reading from Romans this morning tells us that this cry of Abba! Father! in our hearts is the work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness without spirit, revealing our divine adoption to us. And our Gospel reading from John explains that our reconciliation to God has been achieved by the one who descended from the heavens to become one of us: Jesus, the Son. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but may have eternal life. Everything, the whole work of God, and our experience and our contemplation of God, deeply involves each of these three persons.

Father, Son, Spirit...

The Son and the Spirit, since the earliest centuries of the Church, have been described as the two hands of God the Father – both always at work within creation from the beginning. As it says in Psalm 33 ‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.’ The Word is the Son, the Breath the Spirit, both one with and yet distinct from God the Creator, the Source and Fountain of the Trinity, who sends them forth into the cosmos – from when it was a formless chaos – bringing order, purpose, harmony, unity, and life, permeating and sustaining all things – right up to the present moment, and forever.

In the work of our salvation, millennia ago, God also works with these two hands in creation. The Spirit sends the Son into the world by conceiving him in the womb of the Virgin Mary; the Spirit, descending from the Father, alights on the Son as a dove at his baptism before sending him out into the wilderness; the Spirit sends Jesus everywhere in his ministry, eventually to Jerusalem where he will die. And after the resurrection the opposite occurs. This time, at Pentecost, it is the Son who sends the Spirit down on all of us. There is a mutual and reciprocal sending, first the Spirit of the Son, then the Son of the Spirit, all at the initiative of the Father, who is drawing us in.

So, seeing the immense interrelationship, what theologians call perichoresis, within the Trinity, how from creation to salvation, from then till today, it is all done in love – why would we not desire to contemplate and experience this unfathomable mystery?

... far more than simply being of an academic or theological interest, to pursue a deeper immersion into the experience of the Trinitarian God is essential to the ongoing transformational journey of our salvation – it is to, in words from the second letter of Peter, ‘partake in the divine nature’, or the ‘the divine dance’ as others have later described it. Eastern Tradition calls this theosis, divinisation, deification – or being in-godded. It is the inward and upward voyage of entering further into the Mystery of God, an ever-closer union and oneness with the Holy Trinity. Contemplation, experience.

Entering into this is crucial to the Christian walk of faith. It must become something steady and continuous. Many people have had powerful spiritual experiences or encounters – and, again, while all this is great, these are only fleeting instants, moments that come and go. Experience is far more essential than experiences. We must, in the words of one Orthodox scholar, practice allowing that ‘existential wonder’ to become ‘a stable condition of the soul rather than a passing mood.’ We must go deeper into the Being and Eternity of the God until it becomes as natural as breathing. And using the map of the Trinity is enormous bearing on this.

We must pray the Trinity and live the Trinity.

Contemplative prayer can involve iconography, discursive meditation, mysticism, silence... or the repetition of ancient formulaic Trinitarian prayers, like the Trisagion: Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us. Or the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. This is often criticised as focussing on only one person of the Trinity. However, the Jesus Prayer is profoundly Trinitarian; by saying Lord Jesus Christ you are in fact acknowledging the Holy Spirit – as Paul says, only by the Spirit are we able to call Jesus Lord; and by saying Son of God in the prayer, we recognize the relationship of the Son to the Father, the Logos or Word to the Creator and Source. Contemplation, experience, divine mystery.

Living the Trinity is also pivotal. Bishop Kallistos Ware puts the practice of this better than I can. He says:

‘the doctrine of the Trinity ought to have upon our daily life an effect that is nothing less than revolutionary ... Each social unit—the family, the school, the workshop, the parish, the Church universal—is to be made an ikon of the Triunity. Because we know that God is three in one, each of us is committed to living sacrificially in and for the other; each is committed irrevocably to a life of practical service, of active compassion. Our faith in the Trinity puts us under an obligation to struggle at every level, from the strictly personal to the highly organised, against all forms of oppression, injustice, and exploitation. In our combat for social righteousness and “human rights,” we are acting specifically in the name of the Holy Trinity.’

So, what ever your feelings about the doctrine of the Trinity – whether they be confidence or misgivings – I do invite you on this Trinity Sunday to take seriously this dependable map we have for entering into that infinite and eternal mystery of God. The creed may be a human made map, but it aids us on that never-ending voyage, upward and inward, into the experience and contemplation of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.