

Sermon for Trinity Sunday 2019

Here it is again: that Sunday in the lectionary which most preachers dread, or perhaps to disguise it, suddenly think of some other preacher who clearly needs an opportunity to contribute their ministry. It's a preacher's *bête noire* (or perhaps *Bête Blanche*!) Yes, it is Trinity Sunday! This is one of the hardest Sundays for many preachers, occasional or otherwise, simply because we find we have to talk about God. We are trying to look directly at the mystery and majesty of God and make sense of who God is.

As a small boy in the choir, I was alerted to this by a bass sitting behind me, who whispered "It's Trinity Sunday, the vicar will make a right mess of this sermon!" So for once, I listened. All the vicar said was "'Tis a mystery" and then preached on something else (John Courage, the brewers, had a powerful slogan to be seen everywhere, on the sides of buses, hoardings, newspapers, etc, saying "Take Courage" and that is what he preached on!

So, take courage.

I was teaching in 1988 when GCE O level was scrapped in favour of GCSE. Hooray, I thought; until, after two years' careful teaching and preparation for this momentous moment, and with fear and trepidation on the part of the first GCSE candidates, the very first question on the GCSE RS paper was "Who was the mother of Jesus?" 1 mark. Not very testing! But the second question seemed to make up for it - "Explain the Trinity" - 3 marks! Crickey! St Augustine had attempted such a response in his weighty and complex book *De Trinitate*, published about AD 417 and he didn't manage a definitive doctrine.

Analogies are often used to help explain; a light bulb, for example has heat, light and substance and without any one of those, it would not be a light bulb - all three are essential to the definition. It is not hard to see how poor this analogy is. Arithmetic functions are used, too, sometimes, namely " $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ ". However, maths is not the best way to explain the basic doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity either, because it uses the approach of trying to explain how three can be one. We all know that " $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ " but what are we to do about " $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$?" or " $1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ " - 1 to the power of any number = 1, why stop at 3?

The Old Testament gives us a few pre-Christian insights. Today's reading from Proverbs telling us of Wisdom (i.e. the Spirit), that "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth". And then . . . "When He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him as a master craftsman".

The Spirit of the Lord was always present at the utterings of any prophet (for example, Isaiah 61:1 "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me", and subsequently quoted by Jesus in Luke 1:18). When the Spirit of the Lord actually becomes visible in the Old Testament, it is always in a shapeless form, e.g. fire (at the burning bush), wind (Elijah), cloud, etc. This nebulous description is taken up in the Gospels as the Greek word for spirit is *πνευμα* (*pneuma*) which also means breath and wind. In the Old Testament texts, the Spirit of the Lord is visited upon individuals; prophets, kings, etc., and could also be withdrawn, as in the case of Saul (1 Samuel 16: 14 - "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul.")

The Holy Spirit is largely absent from the Gospel narratives, or at least, seems to be, seemingly because Jesus, the Son of God, is there instead. The Spirit does appear as a dove at Jesus's baptism, which some say gives Jesus the divine impetus to begin his mission. And

at the end of his time on earth, Jesus promises his disciples to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to them; called *Παρακλητος* (Parakletos) in the original Greek, this word has no direct, easy translation into modern languages; comforter, advocate, counsellor, helper and literally means “called in aid”. So now, the divine spirit is for everyone, not just the chosen, special, individual

So far, so good, but knowledge without understanding or evaluation is of little use to us. What do we, or can we, understand about the Trinity? In modern Christian teaching, there are basically two complementary forms of the Trinity titled the economic form and the essential, sometimes called the ontological, form. The word economic comes from the Greek *οικονομικος* (oikonomikos), which means relating to arrangement of activities, putting everything in its right position. (Interestingly, being ‘economic with the truth’ actually means ‘allotting the truth to its rightful place’, not ‘telling lies’ or ‘deliberately trying to deceive’!)

The Economic Trinity is the doctrine concerning how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other and the world. Each has a different rôle within the Godhead, each has a different rôle in relationship to the world, although some of these rôles overlap.

Namely:-

The Father sent the Son.

The Son came down from Heaven not to do his own will but the will of the Father.

The Father gave the Son, who is the only begotten, to the world to carry out its redemption.

The Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit.

(Conversely we could say that –

It was not the Son who sent the Father

The Father was not sent to do the will of the Son

The Son did not give the Father, nor was the Father called the only begotten

The Father did not perform the redemptive work

The Holy Spirit did not send the Father and Son

It is not said that the Son or the Holy Spirit chose us, predestined us, gave us to the Father)

1 Peter 1:2 explains it all;- the dispersed people have been “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.”

Thus the Father knows all from the beginning. The Son became man and sacrificed himself. The Holy Spirit sanctifies the church.

To be overly simplistic, we could say that the Economic Trinity deals with what God does, yet, on the other hand, the Essential Trinity deals with what God *is*.

This Essential Trinity is the teaching whereby all three persons within the Godhead are equal in nature, essence, and attributes. Each member of the Trinity is equal in omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, holiness, etc. It differs from the Economic Trinity which deals with the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Godhead and to us. Each

of these three persons is of the same divine essence, and is not inferior or superior to the others in divine essence or attributes. While each person is fully and completely God, the persons are not identical.

It is important to remember that there is one, and only one, true and living God. The classic Biblical passage to establish this claim can be found in Deuteronomy 6:4 - "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" With that statement, the ancient Israelites established themselves as monotheistic. This would set them apart from all of their neighbours who were polytheistic. In the Graeco-Roman world, also with its many gods, the early Christians were in danger of being accused of polytheism because of their teachings on the Trinity.

The best example found in Scripture of the plurality of persons within the Godhead is at the baptism of Jesus. As Jesus is being baptized, we see the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father speaking from heaven declaring his approval of the Son. Other New Testament examples of plurality are the many uses of the Trinitarian formula in the epistles (e.g., at the end of 2 Corinthians "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." – notice the order Paul puts them in – Son, God, Holy Spirit – no hierarchical structure of Father, Son and Holy Spirit here). Finally, we have the famous baptismal formula used by Jesus in the Great Commission in Matt. 28:20 - "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

In The Nicene Creed, which we are about to affirm, is the definitive account of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity. It is binding on all Christians, whether Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed Christians and Eastern Orthodox (*although the last reject the later 'et filioque' addition, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father 'AND the Son'*). These 2 billion believers agree that anyone who denies what is taught in the Nicene Creed stands outside the catholic faith, and any community of Christians that rejects what the Nicene Creed teaches is by definition a sect of Christianity.

This creed is not above Holy Scripture in authority or even on an equal basis with it. But for these 2 billion Christians, the creed expresses what the church has agreed is the teaching of Scripture. Every single statement in this creed reflects what the Bible says or implies. We have here the most authoritative interpretation of what the New Testament teaches on the Father-Son relationship.

So, the doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three in person. These definitions express three crucial truths: firstly, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons, secondly each person is fully God and lastly, there is one and only one, true and living God.

Well, as my old vicar so wisely said - "'Tis a mystery".