

## **A troublesome doctrine**

*Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17*

27 May 2018

Trinity Sunday: the 2000 year old challenge for Christian preachers, and indeed any Christians seeking an understanding of their faith!

The first thing I want to say this morning is an acknowledgement of the contributions of several friends over the past week or two, who helped me with my own thinking about this mighty subject.

The first opinion went like this: "I suppose you are going to tell us that the word Trinity is not in the Bible". Well, I wasn't going to, but perhaps I should, so that I don't disappoint her! She is right, the word Trinity is not in the Bible. So giving a Biblical sermon on the subject may not be that simple. And our Lectionary is not much help here. Take our two readings for today. The Isaiah passage talks about a majestic, powerful God, who could not be seen or approached without painful purification rituals. And in the Gospel reading Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be born again, to be born of the Spirit if he wants to see the Kingdom of God. In a way within the two readings we do have the Father the Son and Spirit mentioned, but that does not really amount to the Trinity, as we have come to know it.

The doctrine of the Trinity evolved in the post-biblical period. The word was first used by one of the church fathers, Tertullian in the early part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and it was made official doctrine by the Council of Nicea in 325 called by the Emperor Constantine. He was the ruler, you may recall, during whose reign Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and political expediency led him to try and shape the new religion into a unifying force, not riddled with heretical disagreements about the nature of God. This doesn't mean, of course, that the Bible doesn't talk about Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but that the particular understanding of the Trinity expressed by the Nicene Creed was the work of a religious committee under the watchful eye of an astute political leader. Of course as we know 'God works in mysterious ways...' so what I am outlining here is the 'human' side of things, as it were.

The second contribution came from someone, who is probably a representative of quite a number of us here when it comes to Christian doctrine. What I mean, most of us have a kind of

worked-out system for our faith, yet hopefully, it is not so rigid, not so final that we may not be open to possible new insights. My hope is that this is part of the reason why we are here Sunday by Sunday. This friend said: "I will be really interested to hear what you have to say about the Trinity, but shall I tell you what I think?" Then she told me that for her the 'proof' of the Trinity is in us. We are 'Trinitarian' creatures, because we are made up of body, mind and spirit. And as we were created in the image of God, it follows that God must have a Trinitarian nature as well. A beautifully simple logic, a kind of 'Trinity (worked out) from below'. It is not surprising that as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century it has already been hit upon by no less a person than St Augustine of Hippo, one of the great foundational theologians of Western Christianity. Although Augustine saw our Trinitarian nature as consisting of Being, Knowledge and Will, yet he too understood the Trinity from below, from the human experience. Whether we agree with these particular analogies and with the idea of 'Trinity from below', they are leading us into an important conclusion. The doctrine of the Trinity is only as important as the difference it makes to our every day lives as followers of Christ. Otherwise, it is just an inherited, rather obscure doctrine, coming from a different age, a different context, which is so difficult to understand that most of our attempts to explain it is doomed to failure.

The third contribution (I hope you are noticing the trinity of contributions!) is based on one of the prayer stations that was set up for the Week of Accompanied Prayer event here in our church. If you had a chance to see them, I am referring to the one, at which we were given a task of plating three different coloured pieces of wool together and make a kind of bracelet of it. I was telling an 'outsider' friend about this, who had interrupted me at this point and said: "O yes, I know that, we used to do it with our children to teach them about the Trinity. The three pieces of wool represented the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Except, that this prayer station was not about *that* Trinity. The three different coloured wool stood for God, myself and a third person, who could be either someone I find difficult to get on with, or someone, who is in great need. And binding these three together would be a sign of my relationship with them and my commitment to their well-being as a crucial part of my relationship with and commitment to God. I have found this really meaningful. It seems to me that it is a helpful variation on, indeed, a development of the 5<sup>th</sup> century doctrine of the Trinity.

I was going to bring out two sides of this development, but being Trinity Sunday, I'd better make it three!

Let's begin with the idea of the relationship between the three parts of the Holy Trinity, keeping in mind that all religious language is metaphor and "metaphors, by necessity walk with a limp", a lovely phrase by Richard Rohr, the well-known Franciscan religious thinker in his book *The Divine Dance*. Any description of God is only an approximation, the best we can do at any given time. Imagining God as Trinity means that at the heart of everything there isn't a single leader, a 'being' alone in solitary splendour, but a *reality that is relational*.

This statement has cosmic significance, the development of quantum physics, biology and cosmology is coming to a common understanding: the shape of the universe is triune; its building blocks are in threes. It follows that as John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford says: "everything is saturated in divine possibility" (John Pritchard: *Something More* 2016). Scientific research has also discovered that the power, the explosive, creative energy does not reside in the individual building blocks, but in the interaction, in the relationship between them.

Taking Jesus' revelation as our guidance, we can say that the relationship, which is the source and dynamic upholder of everything is a mutual *love-relationship*. There is no domination in God. The divine power we call upon in our daily prayers is a shared power. Just think, if we took that seriously? Should it not change our relationships with each other? If the Church of Jesus Christ took it seriously, should it not have changed its use of power and its nurturing of human relationships?

Then we can go onto the next step and say, again based on Biblical insights, that the divine relationship is an *open relationship*. In the religious iconography this is most beautifully illustrated by the famous Rublev icon, where the Trinity is shown with an empty, open, inviting space between them. It is also the meaning of Isaiah's vision in the Temple. However he may have imagined his God, that God was calling him into God's love and concern and action for God's people, Israel. We believe this call still goes out to every individual to get caught up and drawn into God's work in the world. We find the same idea in the intertwining three pieces of wool at our prayer station. Without going into speculations about the nature of God, it

shows in a powerful, symbolic way that God wants us to be part of the divine endeavour as much as we feel the need of being part of it.

And finally, still staying with the different coloured wool (you can probably tell that I am a knitter!) we are led to think of the daring proposition of bringing a third person into our relationship with God and specifically a person, or group of people we may not like or cannot get on with or regard as strangers. What a troublesome Trinity that is! It introduces an imbalance into the equation, it changes the dynamics. We know this from our everyday relationships. Even numbers are much easier to accommodate. Just the other day someone recollected the birth of their first child. He said it was indescribable how that changed their life as a couple and many of you here can relate to this experience. It is probably the most satisfying and joyful of human experiences, but it is also the hardest. It can, of course happen in any social interaction as well. Two people get along fine, but bring in a third and it becomes problematic: whom do you listen to, who dominates the conversation, who is left out, whom do you prefer out of the other two? It can be made to work as family life proves, but it is hard work, it requires curbing of egos, it requires sacrifices.

We are used to thinking of the divine Trinity as the symbol of perfect harmony, but as we've just shown, according to our human experience three can be a difficult number. Taking this on board one commentator raises the intriguing question if that is God's nature, may we take it that God can deal with dis-equilibrium; that in God imbalance is embraced? That in the open nature of God's reality there is room for disharmony as well as harmony? That theology may not be a simple black-and-white matter? That the love-energy we call God is able to hold the black holes as well as the brightest of galaxies? That human suffering may not mean the absence of God, quite the opposite, for that suffering is already part of the divine make-up that is around us and in us and with us. And for this very reason we can call upon it any time with confidence and hope.

And if it so, our faith cannot be content with just me and my God for fear that the relationship may be spoiled by a third party. As someone said we share in our Creator's spiritual DNA and unless we deliberately stop it, the divine power of love flows through us towards others, creating this *other Trinity: God and me and my neighbour*. We cannot be sure what Jesus thought of the doctrine of the Trinity, but we do know for certain that he was quite hot on this other Trinity.

It was his major legacy he left to his followers. This is what makes us into community with strong, upholding relationships; it keeps us open to ever new possibilities and enables us to give up our personal desire for control as we embrace the problem as well as the glorious promise of the Holy Trinity. Let it be so.

Erna Stevenson  
Amersham Free Church