

Trinity

Sunday 20th May 10

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Readings:

Romans 5: 1 – 5

John 16: 12 – 15

The idea of the 'Trinity' is for many one of the most difficult concepts to understand in the Christian faith – so that makes it an ideal subject to preach on to an 'all age congregation'!

Perhaps because the concept is so difficult to understand Trinity Sunday is not viewed with the same enthusiasm or interest as:

- Advent (where we look forward to the coming of Christ), or
- Christmas (when we celebrate the birth of Christ), or
- Holy Week (when we remember Christ's betrayal, trial and death on the cross), or
- Easter (when we celebrate Christ's resurrection), or
- Ascension (when we remember Christ's return to his Father in heaven) or even
- Pentecost (when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit).

... And yet it is fundamental to our faith – as Christians we have to fully believe in the Trinity - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The three are a single indivisible entity.

Can anyone tell me where we can find mention of the Trinity in the bible? ... The answer is of course you can't as the word isn't used anywhere in the bible!

About 2 years ago I was stopped by two well-dressed young men in Calvary Precinct wanting to tell me how I could be saved – they were of course members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints or Mormons as most people know them as.

They were pleased when I told them I was a reader in the Church of England and they said that they had similar beliefs as us- yes they did indeed believe in Jesus Christ. But when I asked if they believed Jesus was God's son or just a prophet they ducked the answer by challenging me where they could find the Creed in the bible.

The answer of course is that you don't – but in effect they were saying that they did not believe Jesus was God's Son.

Although the term 'Trinity' does not appear in Scripture, the Trinitarian structure appears throughout the New Testament to confirm that God Himself is revealed through Jesus Christ by means of the Spirit.

The creed is merely a way of putting our belief in the Trinity into a form that is clear and succinct. There are several versions of the creed, although all confirm belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Some creedal statements date back to the early years of the Christian church whilst others are much more modern such as the ones we normally use in our morning services and today in the Creedal hymn which we will sing shortly.

The Nicene Creed is one of the earliest known creeds and dates back to the Council of Nicaea held in 325AD, the Apostle's Creed often used at Baptisms, although attributed to the Apostle's, was probably written in the 2nd century.

Another popular creed was the Athanasian Creed dating back to the 4th or 5th centuries. It was widely used throughout the world and is still in the Book of Common Prayer:

'Upon these Feasts; Christmas Day, the Epiphany, Saint Matthias, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Whitsunday, Saint John Baptist, Saint James, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Matthew, Saint Simon and Saint Jude, Saint Andrew, and upon Trinity Sunday, shall be sung or said at Morning Prayer, instead of the Apostles' Creed, this Confession of our Christian Faith, commonly called the Creed of Saint Athanasius, by the Minister and people standing.'

The Athanasian Creed was the first in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated. It also differs from the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds (and the more modern versions) by the inclusion of condemnations of those who disagree with the Creed, the creed ending with these words:

'... This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.'

Strong language that leaves believers in no doubt! The creed was originally written in Latin and the English translation is nearly 700 words long and contains some very difficult language to understand:

'... Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated.

The Father incomprehensible the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.'

The doctrine of the Church of England is expressed in the 39 Articles of faith and the Book of Common Prayer. The 39 articles of faith were originally drawn up by Archbishop Cranmer and approved by Queen Elizabeth 1 in 1571. The first of these expresses faith in the Holy Trinity in these words:

'There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'

No wonder people have difficulty understanding the Trinity when words such as those in the Athanasian Creed and the 39 Articles are used! The language is at times incomprehensible – but in the Athanasian Creed the word 'incomprehensible' means 'infinite' or 'unlimited'.

Probably the best example we see in the bible of the Trinity in action is when Jesus was baptised for all three persons the Trinity were involved:

- The God the Father speaks,
- The God the Son is baptised, and
- The God the Holy Spirit descends on the Son anointing him for Ministry.

But it is probably in Matthew 28:19 that we have the clearest statement of the Trinity when Jesus says to his disciples:

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

God has revealed Himself to us not only as Father and Creator, but also as Son and Saviour, as well as Holy Spirit and Comforter.

New Testament passages make statements about the work and person of each member of the Trinity to show that each is God but the Bible strongly affirms that God is one, not three. It expresses the diversity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in the midst of the unity of God's being.

For example some NT passages portray each member of the Trinity in relation to a particular redemptive function such as Jude 20-21:

'But you dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.'

So the New Testament presents the doctrine of the Trinity, but in such a way that it does not violate the OT concept of the oneness of God. In fact, it confirms the Hebrew single God faith, whilst extending it to include the coming of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

So what does the Trinity mean for us today?

In our consumer society we are used to special offers 'Buy one get one free', '3 for the price of 2' tempting us to perhaps buy more than we need or even what we do not want!

But ... three in one? Three for the price of one! What an offer! But this is no sales gimmick for it is essential for us and life for we cannot do without any of the three - we can't be selective or choosy we can't have one without the other two for it is the basis of our faith as expressed in the Creed:

- God the Father maker of heaven and earth
- Jesus Christ Son of God came to earth for our salvation
- The Holy Spirit, giver of life

The concept of the three in one is difficult for some people to understand – over twenty years ago the theologians Daniel Hardy and David Ford suggested it

might be worth thinking of the Trinity as music – God the composer-performer-listener.

Others have suggested ice-water-steam model, but the problem with this model is that although ice and water can co-exist as can water and steam but all three cannot exist at the same time.

Although the Trinity might be difficult to understand our faith depends on our believing in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But faith is not like science, where we can have visible proof, verifiable by measurement or experiment. We cannot draw up equations to explain or demonstrate God's way of doing things.

But many people want something tangible, visual, and "real" before they believe. So Jesus did healings and other miracles, and God raised Jesus from the dead and sent his Holy Spirit to comfort, guide and support. And yet still people doubt.

I think those who have problems understanding and accepting the Trinity, have no problem in God the Father or in God the Son but I have heard people question belief in God the Holy Spirit and yet ... we see from today's gospel reading that Jesus said:

'But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.' (John 16: 13)

Jesus' disciples would only fully understand Jesus' teachings and that he truly was the Son of God when they received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was their guide.

Jesus was the way, he pointed the way to God he provided the map. The Holy Spirit is our guide, navigator, and pathfinder.

The Holy Spirit then plays a pivotal, central role on our journey of faith, without him we will get lost; we will fail to fully understand – just as the original disciples failed to understand.

We must rely on the Holy Spirit for he has been given to us for the express purpose of being our guide – and if the original disciples needed a guide to lead the way and to enlighten them then how much more do we need him?

Last week we celebrated the Day of Pentecost the day when the Holy Spirit came in a very dramatic and sudden way to demonstrate that God was starting something new. That was what we would call a 'one off special' but it certainly doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit is no longer active.

A couple of years ago we were in Yorkshire at Pentecost and went to the local church a beautiful small old church. The minister appeared to be well past retirement and he led the whole service in an almost bored monotone.

His sermon was read from pages brown with age, obviously well used, and as he finished he put his notes in his bible and as he closed it he said in the same bored monotone 'So I wonder why we don't see the Holy Spirit active in our church today?' The phrase 'physician first heal thyself' came to mind!

Jesus said he would send the Holy Spirit and he did! The Holy Spirit was active then and is still active now – even here in this room at this very moment!

In the reading we had from Romans 5: 5 Paul says:

'... hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.'

We need to be open to the Holy Spirit for he is our guide to follow Jesus to God the Father.

On this Trinity Sunday then let us surrender to Jesus and truly repent of our sins. Let us ask God to forgive us in the name of Jesus, His Son and ask him to fill us afresh with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and may we willingly and lovingly follow where he leads.

So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us for evermore. Amen