

Trinity Sunday 2018

Matthew 28.16 - 20

This week the subject of sermons, and one sermon in particular, has been much in the news. And so it's rather disappointing to reflect that, up and down the country, preachers will be climbing into the pulpit and telling lame jokes about, or – worse – complaining about, the difficulty of preaching on Trinity Sunday. It's only a difficulty if we think that the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity is a difficulty. And if a preacher thinks that, then he or she is probably in the wrong business.

There are several reasons why such wrongheadedness persists. First of all, we are under the impression that the preacher's job on Trinity Sunday is to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. It isn't. Not because the preacher is not St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas, but because doctrine – Christian teaching – isn't something we explain. It's something we do, something which all of us

do as Christians, because it is the activity of the church. Christian teaching means living the Christian life.

Secondly, we have all swallowed the daft notion that it's easy to talk about the one God, but that the Trinity is the point at which theological talk really becomes problematic. I can make sense of the idea of God, but when I turn to the Trinity my reason has broken down. Codswallop. My reason has broken down the moment I have used the word God. What God is, is – by definition – beyond my ken. In abstract, I can know nothing of the reality of the infinite and ineffable creator. I can say things about God through denial – trivially, God is not a bouncy castle, more substantively, God is not less than perfect. But if I want to know what God is, I have no hope unless God himself chooses to help me out. And this he does, by becoming a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

We need God to speak his word in Jesus Christ precisely because God is not like us in our individual limitation. Which points us to a third problem, the fact that we

struggle with the Trinity because we are reluctant to admit that we should not think of God the way we think of ourselves. We are so falsely isolated in our own perspective on the world, thinking of our inner thoughts and lives as unique, holding on to the singularity which we think to be ourselves, and pursuing an approach to those around us which is characterized by self and individual gain. We think of power and of action as individualistic, and hence we think that the Almighty must be like us, only more so. Wrong again. Confessing the possibility that plurality as much as singularity lies at the loving heart of creation, is confessing that our self-focused attitude to the world, and to our place within it, might not be all its cracked up to be.

The mystery of God is just that, a mystery. Not a puzzle to be unravelled or a plot to be resolved. It is something which is beyond us. But this mystery is not an abstraction. Quite the contrary. Our mistake is in pursuing this mystery as if it were a puzzle or an exercise, when in fact it reveals itself to us in the activity of love.

For a Christian, to speak of God is to speak of Jesus Christ. When we talk of God as Trinity we are taking for granted the talk of Father and Son, the words and the actions of Jesus, which lie at the heart of the gospels. Reflection on that talk is what led Christians to speak of God in terms that are not just single or individual. Encountering God in Christ, means encountering a relationship of love into which the Christian is invited, and with which the Christian is united, as the love of Father and Son overflows, includes, envelops us pouring itself out into that which is beyond. This is what the Trinity means – love poured out, love given and received. This is, for a Christian, what it means to speak of God.

But that speaking is always secondary, a reflection upon something which is already true in the life of the believer and the life of the church. Jesus calls us to love God and neighbour. To love God is to live within the life of the Trinity – there is no love of God which does not overflow. It is the doing, the living of the Christian life,

which teaches us the doctrine – the lesson, the teaching – that God is three in one.

Prayer and worship, for example, are offered to the Father, in union with Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Christians are baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit because by the activity of the Spirit they are united with the death and resurrection of Christ which is his offering of humanity to the Father. The eucharist, too, is only properly understood if the Trinity remains the basis of our understanding: the Son, offered to the Father, in the Spirit. The practice of prayer, the activity of praise, the sacramental life of the church, all these are our ways of obeying Christ's commandment to love God, and all these are Trinitarian activities.

The same is true of Christ's commandment to love, because our love for God necessitates love for others. If I truly love God I must love others. To love my neighbour as myself is to give myself in love to another for no thought of personal gain. To become, in other words, someone for another, just as God chooses in

Christ to be God for us. My neighbour is the child of God the Father, the image of Christ his son, the temple of the spirit which gives life to all of God's children. Uniting myself with another person in love is the closest I can come to imitating the divine life, to displaying the image of God which has been bestowed in me and which I am all too ready to mar and to obscure. The ability to love, the creative power of love which initiates relationship, which calls life into being, is the Holy Spirit in you and in me.

Love, then, is what we mean when we talk about God, when we say God is plurality as well as unity, is three as well as one. The human experience of love is the experience of giving oneself to another and knowing oneself to be loved, knowing that the act of self-giving is both the most generous and the most rewarded, the riskiest and the safest thing to do, because the gift is no gift if we hold on to ourselves, but ourselves are only ourselves in what we receive from the one who loves us. That remarkable human ability is as near as we can get to the mystery of God, because that mystery is revealed

to us in the one who incarnates self-giving, who enacts the impossibility of infinite love and makes it possible for you and for me.