

Dancing around a mysterious topic?

Genesis 1:1-2:4a
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

We worship one God, who is paradoxically also three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today we acknowledge and celebrate the Holy Trinity.

It seems to be a kind of standing joke among preachers that asserts that to attempt to preach on the Holy Trinity is to guarantee preaching heresy. The difficulty is that to explain the Trinity, which is quite unlike anything else we know, we have to use analogy and metaphor, and we find that any analogy or metaphor we can come up with fails – either because it leaves something important out, or because the explanation implied by the illustration is inaccurate in some respect or other. And attempts by preachers to explain the Trinity carefully can feel like a sad joke perpetrated by preachers on their congregations, as things become more and more convoluted and esoteric – and perhaps dry and boring.

It is also commonplace to note that Trinity Sunday is the only day in the calendar of the Church that is set aside for a particular teaching or doctrine, rather than marking, as is usually the case, a significant event in the life of Jesus or some other part of the biblical narrative. A difficulty we face is that the teaching of the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be found as such in the Bible, even though there are strong hints of it here and there – such as in today's readings.

The doctrine took several hundred years to trash out after the death and resurrection of Christ, and involved considerable controversy and, sadly, conflict, as the church struggled with just how to understand why, out of its origins within a Judaism that firmly asserted that there is only one true God, it came to also worship a first century *man* named Jesus. One of the products of these debates along the way were the famous creeds, of which two from that time – the Apostles' Creed, and the Nicene Creed – are regularly part of our worship still today.

So we might wonder, what is the point? Why this emphasis on thrashing out doctrine? Why try to pin down something that to this day can tie us in knots as we try to explain it? Why not just leave it alone, ignore it, and move on?

The thing is, what we *believe* is important. It is important because belief is not just about a kind of intellectual assent – “I agree that this concept is the best explanation for the facts as I apprehend them”. Belief is also about what, or who, we will put our trust in; belief is about our ultimate allegiance and commitment. In the first century the doctrinal statement “Jesus is Lord”, was tantamount to saying “and Caesar is not”. It was not for nothing that a lengthy catechesis – a period of training and testing – was, in the first centuries of the Church, required before someone could be baptised: it was because a significant commitment was being made that involved renouncing other commitments. And part of that baptismal ceremony involved making statements of belief.

There were then, and are now, all manner of rival claims for our ultimate allegiance, and some of them are deceptive and can easily divert us into wasting our lives in the pursuit of goals that are not those of God, or which do not put God first. Some of the rival claims are also good in their way; but it is easy for them to get in the way of our wholehearted allegiance to God. “Jesus is Lord ... and wealth is not”; “Jesus is Lord ... and the creation is not”; “Jesus is Lord ... and my friend is not”; “Jesus is Lord ... and my group or tribe is not”, “Jesus is Lord ... and the satisfaction of my wants is not”, “Jesus is Lord ... and church is not”; “Jesus is Lord ... and tolerance is not”. Now I would emphasise once again that many of these things may be good in their own way; but what is at stake here is what or who claims our ultimate allegiance.

Today’s Bible readings shed some light on the nature of God, and are among the texts that hint at the doctrine of the Trinity. Today I want to use them to simply highlight a couple of the understandings of God that we still need to be on guard against, and why these matter.

The passage from Genesis reminds us first that God is not the same thing as creation. That might seem a pretty obvious thing to say, but it is remarkably

common today (as it was to the ancient Greeks and Romans) to believe something like “God is everywhere and everywhere is God”, or “God is everything and everything is God”, or that “the divine is a force which runs through everything”. This is what is called *pantheism*. Under this form of belief, the human purpose is to get in touch with and in tune with the divinity within themselves and within the world around.

This is all very well, and has for some drawn them into a whole-of-life spirituality (which is good) and into an appreciation of nature and of the wonderful diversity of humankind (which is also good). But the problem with it is that it has no answer for the problem of evil. There is no recourse to anything outside or beyond when things go bad, when people do evil things, when nature hurls the full force of its chaos against you. Tragically, at that point, despair sets in, and the escape of death seems the only way out.

Genesis asserts that creation – nature and humankind – is not the same thing as God, and that God stands over against and above it. And that means that we can look to God when evil and disaster strike and as we try to comprehend how these things can occur. (I’ll leave that there, because it is a very large topic in its own right – perhaps for another day!)

The other thing the Genesis passage reminds us of, is that God cares about and is involved in the creation God made. There were groups among the ancients who held that God or the gods were completely remote, uninterested in and uninvolved in what went on in creation. A similar view grew up in the 18th century, called Deism: the idea of a watchmaker God, who created the world, set it running, and then has left it alone to run its course. This belief is still around today; and leads to a mindset that is pretty devoid of spirituality and worship – effectively saying, “why should I concern myself with a god who is unconcerned with me?”

Genesis asserts God’s intimate engagement with creation – and we find elsewhere in the Bible what that engagement would go on to mean.

On Trinity Sunday it is easy for us to assume that the point of hearing Matthew 28 is because of the Trinitarian formula Jesus commissions his followers to use: baptise them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But to focus there is to miss other important things in what Jesus said.

The first thing is a statement that on its own, even without everything else Jesus said and did, would have forced his Jewish followers to have to do a major re-think of how they understood God: Jesus declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”. Now it is one thing for a man to declare that God has given him all authority over the earth. But it is of a different order again for a man to declare that God has also given him authority over heaven, the realm in which God dwells.

And tied up in this is a hint of God’s answer to the problem of evil; an answer that is impossible within pantheism. In Jesus, God has provided one who stands outside of creation but who has authority over it; authority to rule for its own good and for God’s good purpose for it; authority to put things to rights; authority to heal, forgive, redeem, and restore.

Jesus goes on to say, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” At his birth, Jesus was named “Emmanuel” which means “God with us”. And here, at the end of his earthly ministry he promises that this “God-with-ness” will continue to the end of the age as he sustains and equips and empowers us with the divine breath, the Holy Spirit.

So here again we have the contrast to the watchmaker God. In Jesus, we have God-with-us, God intimately involved with us – taking human flesh to do what humankind could not do for itself.

It is vitally important that we know the God we worship. It is a huge topic; and at its heart is mystery – mystery that comes from the inability of the created to comprehend the full nature of the Creator.

There are many risks for preachers on Trinity Sunday. One of the biggest risks is that we can get so tied up with explaining the Trinity that it can feel like we're carefully defining a thing, an object.

But at the heart of our understanding of the Trinity is relationship and calling. The Psalm set down for today is Psalm 8:

LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.
²Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
³When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?^[c]
⁵You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.
⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet...

Here's the remarkable thing: into the very mystery and majesty of the nature of God, we are invited and called to take our place and to have our role. God's mission to all people and to all of creation involves *us*. God who is intimately concerned for his creation has set in motion a plan to put it to rights, to restore its original perfection and beauty; and we are sent as part of the implementation of that plan. That is what we are baptised into the threefold name to do; that is what we are given the breath of the Spirit to empower us for.

It is difficult for us humans to find language adequate to describe the mystery of God. It is especially difficult when we try to describe or explain the mystery that is God who is Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three in such perfect relationship and love as to be one. The theologians in the early church too tried to describe this

wonderful reality that we call Trinity. If any of you have ever seen a Greek wedding, you may have seen their distinctive way of dancing. It's called perichoresis. There are not just two dancers, but at least three. They start to go in circles, weaving in and out in this very beautiful pattern of motion. They start to go faster and faster and faster, all the while staying in perfect rhythm and in sync with each other. Eventually, they are dancing so quickly (yet so effortlessly) that as you look at them, it just becomes a blur. Their individual identities are part of a larger dance. The early church teachers looked at that dance, the perichoresis, and said, "That's what the Trinity is like." It's a harmonious set of relationships in which there is mutual giving and receiving. This relationship is called love, and it's what the Trinity is about. The perichoresis is the dance of love.¹

Now, here's the thing: God made human beings to join that dance of love – love with God, and love with one another.

God opens up God's own inner life, and invites us to participate in it, and to be the means by which others are invited too.

Works consulted:

- Stephen W Need, *Truly Human and Truly Divine*, SPCK 2008
- John Rollefson, *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, 2016*
- Tom Wright, *Simply Christian*, SPCK 2006
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays*, SPCK 2012

¹ <https://musicanddancing.wordpress.com/perichoresis/>