

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Sunday 27 May 2018

Introduction

Lord Jesus, giver of light and grace, fill us with the generosity of spirit to give all we have to your praise and glory. Amen

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday. The theological connoisseurs among you will obviously know that this is the only Sunday in the Church's year that is devoted to a doctrine. You would certainly be well justified in wondering why this should be the case. I can offer a couple of explanations: first, because it is such a difficult concept to articulate and understand (of which more later) and secondly, perhaps more pragmatically, because it was such a controversial topic in the life of the early church that it was considered helpful to remind the faithful of the doctrine on an annual basis.

Indeed, it is hard to underestimate how polemical the concept of the Trinity was in the life of the early Church. In our own time we have experienced significant conflict within the church over issues such as homosexuality or the ordination of women, but that is a relative walk in the park compared to the Trinity. No fewer than eleven heresies are connected to the doctrine of the Trinity over a period of two hundred years and it was only really settled (if you can give it that level of finality) with the Council of Nicea in 325 and only then arguably because Constantine waited outside with his army and insisted on waiting until the bishops could come to agreement. Interestingly though, it is

only in medieval times that Trinity Sunday took a place in the church's calendar – allegedly it was Thomas Becket who introduced this to the church to commemorate his consecration as Archbishop of Canterbury on this Sunday, ordaining that it be dedicated to the Trinity in memory of this special day. Although therefore a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar, still no less controversial, so only the truly bold would insist on preaching a sermon on a doctrine – and I'm not that bold! Nevertheless, I would like to explore briefly the significance how the Trinity – God in three persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit – fundamentally shapes our Christian faith and our discipleship. And in particular the Holy Spirit which was the cause of such controversy at Nicea.

A way that some find helpful to characterise this is by looking at how the bible arguably has three different foci – the Old Testament speaks to us of the Father, Creator of the world and judge of the world; the gospels speak to us of Jesus, Son of God, his birth, crucially his baptism and his ministry; the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles speak to us of the work of the Holy Spirit, most obviously in the feast of Pentecost which we celebrated last week. As a way of accessing the Trinity this is perhaps quite illuminating, but we have to remember that there is a dynamic reinforcing relationship at work here. For example, the opening lines of Genesis speak of the 'ruach', the Spirit of God hovering over the deep. It would be overly simplistic to think that the concept of the Spirit is only revealed in that latter parts of the new testament.

Indeed, this concept of God as Spirit was fundamental to the self-identity of the Jews. For them, as for us Christians, God as Spirit, ruach, was another name for God. In fact, the Spirit, the breath of God was in many situations the manifestation of God's holy presence. For the people of Israel, the presence of

God was made present in the ark of the covenant. The ark became the dwelling place of God, the spirit. The ark was central to their wandering in the wilderness. It was 'sacramental' for them: the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual truth.

The loss of the ark therefore was the loss of the presence of God. So during the exile one of the principal themes of the prophets was the sense of abandonment by God, the loss of God's Spirit, which, they believed had come about because the people had not kept the law properly. Their solution to the problem of the Exile was exclusivity: build a fence around God and his people and protect it from 'outsiders'. God's Holy Spirit belonged to them and them alone. In a sense, they wanted to contain God's presence.

But, as John shows us in his gospel, our reality as Christians is fundamentally different. Back to Genesis: 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Compare now with the opening of John's gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John is building a very powerful bridge between the origins of the Word, the Spirit of God, the Father Creator God and the Son of God, made incarnate in Jesus. And this is why Trinity Sunday which we celebrate today is so important. God is one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Hebrews fully understood two

parts of this reality: Father and Holy Spirit. They were only too well aware that the Holy Spirit was the same as God; when prophets spoke through the Spirit, they were speaking through God. That was what inspiration (literally being in-breathed by the Spirit) was all about. And that is why the priests and the Pharisees were so keen to try to constrain the Spirit, to control it and to confine it to a particular dwelling place (the Ark), then to a particular group, and then to a particular place – the holy of holies in the Temple in Jerusalem to which only a very limited few had access.

This is one of the reasons why Jesus was so threatening to the priests and the Pharisees. His message was one of inclusivity not exclusivity. God could not be constrained by buildings or fenced in by the religious officials. God is not just for one group of select people, God is also on the margins, with the outcasts, with the unclean. And this inclusivity is personified in the Holy Spirit, which blows where it will, is Jesus' gift to us, and through the Pentecost event is unleashed for all.

The real theology of the Trinity is that we believe in one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit: The Father who created the World, the Son who saved the world through his death and resurrection, and the Spirit who gives life to the World. And we celebrate this frequently in our morning service in the words of the Grace: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore.

So why is the Spirit so important for us – the third 'person' of the Trinity, as one with the Father and the Son? Jesus tells Nicodemus that no-one can enter the kingdom of heaven unless they are born again of the spirit. Our 'rebirth' in the Spirit is an essential stage in our development as Christians.

In the words of a Brazilian friend of mine:

At the origins of Christianity stand two events of equal importance. Christian doctrine teaches that these two events are intimately bound up with one another. The first event is Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection. The second event is the experience of the Spirit in the early communities.

Western theology has downplayed the 'Pentecost event' and sought to make everything derive from the 'Easter event'. But without experience of the Spirit, Jesus could never have moved men and women of his day as he did, not even those who heard him and followed him.

Why has it been downplayed? – Much theology has been about Christ, Christology, or about the church, ecclesiology, but very little has been on the Spirit. Part of the trouble is that the Spirit, or living in the Spirit is difficult, hard to control. Throughout history the church has always felt uneasy with the emotion, the physicality and the uncontrollability of the spirit. For many of us in the West in particular the spirit is more associated with the heart than the head, whilst we are often more comfortable with thinking than feeling. Even Paul found it a problem – one of his reasons for writing to the church at Corinth was that they were too taken with living in the Spirit and he had to remind them of their responsibilities in the world and to bring them back to the Jesus event.

Our challenge is to live 'Spirit filled lives', and I think that to live a Spirit filled life means movement and action. As Paul says many times in his letters, there

are many gifts of the Spirit, prayer, prophecy, witness etc, but I don't think there is one that is sitting around doing nothing.

In that respect we are called to reflect the dynamism of the Trinity itself, which is about the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No one thing can happen without the involvement of the other, it is a paradigm of the relationships we are challenged to represent in our own lives, equal, inclusive and loving.

How that is made manifest in each of us will be different, of course, listening to the Spirit is extremely difficult because often we strain to hear, we struggle to understand and we are humbled by the task. But, this is our faith, our calling: Created by the Father, saved by His Son and living in his Spirit.

So, I pray for all of us, this Trinity Sunday:

Loving Father

Open our hearts.

So that we may feel the breath and the play of your Spirit.

Unclench our hands

So that we may reach out to one another,

And touch and be healed.

Open our lips

That we may drink in the delight and the wonder of life

Unclog our ears

To hear your agony in our inhumanity

Open our eyes

So that we may see Christ in friend and stranger

Breathe your Spirit into us

And touch our lives with the life of Christ

Amen