

Consubstantial, Coeternal

Isaiah 40. 12-17, 27-end; 2 Cor 13. 11-end

Matt 28. 16-end

Beverley Minster and Molescroft

Trinity Sunday 2014

God of glory,

Touch our lips with the fire of your Spirit,

That with all creation

We may rejoice to proclaim your praise;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Alt Colls 4 bef Advent

It can be a dangerous thing to attempt humour in church. The Bishop of Leeds has got away with some light hearted prayers for the World Cup (the one for England simply says 'Oh God...' which might be exactly right however hard we tried last night) in a way which I didn't in 2002 (they are probably still on Google...). Once, at York Minster, where we published the titles for sermons well in advance, I chose a title for Trinity Sunday: 'Consubstantial, coeternal'. I hoped that using the two most complex and theological words contained in any popular hymn, one of my colleagues would see the joke, and request a more accessible title. Instead, the joke was on me, and they just got me to preach the sermon. So, 'consubstantial, coeternal', it was.

The words come from the last verse of a seventh century Latin hymn. Often divided into two separate hymns, it is best known in J.M. Neale's translation: 'Blessed City, heavenly Salem', and 'Christ is made the sure foundation'.

'Christ is made' is in our green hymn book, and it ends with this ascription of praise to God the Holy Trinity.

*Praise and honour to the Father,
Praise and honour to the Son,
Praise and honour to the Spirit,
Ever Three and ever One;
Consubstantial, co-eternal,
While unending ages run.*

It is the case that Neale has made more of the Latin than is actually there. *Hymns Old and New* doesn't mess with the original translation, but some recent versions have changed the penultimate line from 'consubstantial coeternal' to 'one in love and one in splendour', which has merit of making it easier to preach on.

I think that the change is significant, and has a bearing on how we approach the Trinity. 'Consubstantial, coeternal' are technical terms in theological and philosophical speculation about the nature of God. Battles were fought and lives were lost in the early Christian centuries about whether the Son of God came after God the Father and was a created being, or whether the Son was there from eternity to eternity. In the early centuries of the church some people wanted to say that 'there was a time when the Son was not', and was therefore an inferior being. Others were determined that this was wrong, and said that the Son was always the Son – in the words of the carol he was 'begotten not created'.

That we have the formulation 'eternally begotten of the Father' in our Creeds shows who won. The Son is there from the beginning.

It was a matter of equally violent debate to decide whether Jesus the Christ was the same as God; whether his being was the same in essence as that of the Father. More technical terms were coined and defined – consubstantial being one of them. Again, after four centuries or so, using the finest minds and the widest of debates, the councils of the church, at Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon declared that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, and that God the Trinity was indeed eternal in three persons of the same substance. More debate happened about the place of the Holy Spirit, and there's a theological dispute to this day between East and West as to whether the Spirit 'proceeds' – comes – from the Father alone or the Father and the Son.

It cannot be denied that such theological speculation needs to take place. And yet I do not believe that we keep Trinity Sunday just so that clergy can show that they were awake in their church history and doctrine lectures and know what key phrases in the Creed refer to. There is more to this than defining the categories of philosophical thought. The original Latin of the hymn, written only a couple of hundred years after these things had been thrashed out, and in a time when talking theology was more widespread than it is now, does not speak of 'eternity' and 'substance', but of praise, love and splendour. God in Trinity is about the giving and receiving of love, the offering and acceptance of worship, and about the revelation of glory.

The Trinity has a hold on our Christian lives because God in three persons shapes our praying – to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. The Trinity enfolds our Christian journey because we are drawn into a community of love and worth and respect and value and life: we live in the Trinity. The Trinity encircles our worship because in the life of God, Creator, Redeemer, Lifegiver, in the Trinity is all our praise and all the giving of ourselves. The Trinity is the ground and the means and the object of our praise.

The Trinitarian formulations we see in Scripture are not academic theses, but are found in experiences of overwhelming power and glory. Isaiah is overwhelmed by the majesty of God in creation, and stunned by the intimacy of the God who is close even to the worthless and gives strength even to the weary. The endings of Paul's letters, including the words we now call the grace from our Epistle reading this morning are active prayers that God will be present among his people as they encounter the communion which God brings. The ending of Matthew's Gospel commands us to go in the power of God and include people in the life of God in Trinity, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is about God being God. And that includes everything.

To believe in the Trinity is to encounter God in love and splendour, and then, like Isaiah, Paul and Matthew, to find healing, forgiveness, power and offer all that we are in worship, discipleship, service and evangelism.

This is about grace, love, fellowship, proclamation, worship, offering, awe, intimacy, change, and eternity. These may be deep theological pools. But jump in. The water is lovely.

Holy God,

Faithful and unchanging:

Enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth,

And draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love,

That we may truly worship you,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

One God, now and for ever.

Alt Colls Trinity Sunday