

# The Trinity ...

## *... a lived experience*

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*A sermon given on Trinity Sunday, 26th May 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster*

*John 3:1-17*

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . Amen.*

There we are. I've already said it. I've already given you the central core belief that Christians hold about God - in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, what we call the Trinity. And yet the Trinity is a subject which alienates other monotheistic faiths like the Jews and Muslims, and frankly, bamboozles most Christians as well, if they are entirely honest. How do we understand the nature of God? God who in so many ways is utterly beyond us, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. This great festival, the last in the sequence of festivals, was a relative latecomer to the church's calendar. It was only declared to be a major feast just about the same time that this Minster nave was being built in the 14th century, and it has always caused difficulties and discussions; it has always caused Christians to argue. What do we mean when we talk about three persons in one God? Because for us, a person is a person, a separate entity - body, mind, and spirit, so we really struggle with the idea of three persons in one God.

But let me reassure you, if you struggle with the idea, it's nothing to what the church went through in the early centuries of its existence. There were rows and battles for century after century, trying to work out the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we come to the creed after the sermon, you will say those words, "The only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, begotten not made, of one being with the Father." What you may very well not realise is that behind those phrases lie some of the greatest battles in the church's history. Above all, a battle about whether or not the Son was the equal of the Father. Many wanted to say 'no' - he is great, but he is created by the Father; he is of a similar substance to the Father, but not the same. For those beliefs and the fighting out that battle, our battles today in the church are absolutely minor. People died for these declarations; bishops and archbishops were pushed out of their dioceses; emperors were overthrown in that battle, and it took four centuries to work it out, to come to the point that we have in our creed today - and even today, we are not in total agreement with the Orthodox churches of the East.

There's a lovely account in the fourth century of somebody saying, 'Oh - I just can't get away from these arguments: I go to the baths and somebody's and they want to have an argument about whether the son is equal to the father or not; if I go to have my hair cut, they're arguing about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or just from the Father.'

It really was the hot topic, not just of the day but of centuries. So how can we approach it in a creative way today? Well, I think we can say that in the beginning, in the New Testament, there's a lot of fluidity about that relationship, and it wasn't yet hardened into one fixed doctrine. If you read the New Testament, what you will find is that sometimes it seems that the Son is subordinate to the Father, at other times, absolutely equal with the Father. Is the Holy Spirit sent from God the Father, or as in John's gospel, Jesus saying, "I will send you another Comforter, the Holy Spirit."

The first thing I think really to lay down firmly is that the doctrine is not something dreamt up - it comes out of the living experience of the church. With the Jewish people of the Old Testament, there was a strong belief in the oneness of God, God the Father, God the Creator, God the Protector and Leader of his People. But even in the Old Testament, there are hints of a beginning of a plurality, so you have the wisdom of God, almost like a separate person. Then, those first disciples experienced God in Jesus, in the person, in a living human being. And so evolved the idea that God had sent his only son into the world: not just another great prophet; not just another king in the line of David; but no less than his own son who would take upon him the sins of the world and reconcile and heal the divisions between God and humanity. When Jesus had departed from earthly presence on Earth, [those disciples] powerfully experienced the Holy Spirit, the power of God like a rushing wind that could blow wherever it wanted to; the Spirit of God at work in the world not just out there somewhere, but in the lives of individuals, in the lives of communities, in the lives of all of us.

And so we go on experiencing God in these three different ways: as a Father, as the Supreme Creator, as a Supreme Being; but we also relate to him as God the Son, in the person of Jesus Christ, whose teachings we seek to follow and whose examples we take as examples and guides for our own life; and we do all that (and **can** only do that) in the power of God's Holy Spirit, God dwelling in every one of us.

So that's the first thing to say in-depth, that we recognise not just a doctrine (that came later - that was lots of theologians fighting and arguing for centuries), but what we actually bear witness to when we talk of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a lived reality of this rich, diverse God working in our lives, working in the whole of creation.

Then the other thing I think which is very important is that the Trinity really lays down the idea that within God there is relationship, there is a flow of love: before God created anything, there was a relationship of love within the Godhead - after all, you can't have very much in the way of meaningful love if there isn't someone or something to love - and we believe that creation comes out of that overwhelming love, it flows out into creation. And through Christ, it flows out in a way which sets our relationship with God right. And I think that is so important as part of what we believe and how we live - that we are Christians not just in isolation, but in relationship.

Those of you who were at my lecture last Tuesday will remember that when we were talking about decline in churchgoing, Jonathan said, I think very aptly, that a lot of it is because of the privatisation of faith, the privatisation of belief: I believe what I believe, and

you can believe [what you believe] and everybody's equal. Whereas in the Trinity, we are seeing something about an essential community element to faith, that we're not just a group of individuals who turn up on a Sunday morning each with a private hotline to God - we are a community. We share love with each other, as well as having it shared with us from God and when we share in the communion, at a symbolic level, we are sharing in a common meal.

So ... a lived experience - this is how we have discovered God to be. And it's got great richness and diversity and so much to offer people. We also believe that it's about the idea of relationship, that we do not live alone, we do not die alone, we live in community, and that to be a Christian is not just to have a private hotline to God, but to live as part of this community or other Christian communities around the world, sharing together in the Eucharist.

So whilst it may be difficult - and it should be difficult. We can never plumb the depths of God, or say, "We've got God worked out." Somebody once said, "If you think you understand God, then whatever it is you're understanding, isn't God at all, because God is greater all our thoughts."

The Trinity is the best attempt we have to express the reality that we have experienced and the reality which we seek to share in the world.

Amen.

# Reading Text

## John 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.