

Readings: 2 Cor 13:11-13 Matt 28:16-20

Theme: Trinity

Prayer: Lord God, make us attentive to your voice speaking to us, so that we may all know you as our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on which the church remembers and celebrates the Doctrine of the Trinity. That is, God as three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit OR Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer (as I just used in the opening prayer). Three persons sharing one substance.

It's almost a running joke amongst preachers as to who draws the short straw and has to preach on this baffling subject (I seem to have drawn it an awful lot over the past twelve years). As Alister McGrath, a theology professor and writer, says, "the Doctrine of the Trinity is unquestionably one of the most perplexing aspects of Christian theology, and requires careful discussion." - ! (Christian Theology p.292)

Well, I hope to treat it carefully today. I'm going to outline, today, some of the historical development of this doctrine, in the hope that it will help us to understand it more; and then we'll think about its relevance to our Christian lives (and yes, there is one!).

Then, hopefully, we will grow in our knowledge of God, in the three persons that He is, and in our Christian witness.

The doctrine of the Trinity originates in the Bible.

The two short passages of the New Testament we heard this morning are often thought of by Christians as the only places where the Trinity is specifically mentioned. Go and baptise "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion (fellowship) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

But if these were the only references in the Bible to the three persons of God, they wouldn't be enough to build a whole doctrine on. No, the doctrine is built on the "pervasive pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness" (AM p.293). In other words, all through it we see God described

as moving and working in different ways: “The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit” (ibid).

So, for example, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 we hear this:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone”.

And, in Galatians 4:6, we read:

“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’”

And there are many other passages like these.

And also in the Old Testament, similarly, God is described as working in 3 different ways:

- ‘Wisdom’ is a person (a female person!) that personifies the attributes of divine wisdom that God has;
- the ‘word of God’ is often something which has its own independence and ‘goes out’ to the people;
- and thirdly, the ‘spirit of God’ or the ‘breath of God’ is evident especially at creation.

The Old and New testaments both describe God working in 3 different ways, and point to a pattern of divine activity – this is how God works!

And the doctrine of the Trinity is “the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in Scripture and continued in Christian experience.” (AM p. 294)

Is this how you have experienced God?

Could you say that, like the first Christians in the New Testament, you have known “the Father, revealed in Christ, through the Spirit”?

Over time, various theologians put their minds to working out what these references to divine activity actually meant. The recognition that Jesus was divine and therefore God’s co-equal was established before the Council of Nicae in 325 AD. After that, the divinity of the Holy Spirit was discussed, and was understood slightly differently in the Eastern Christian church to the Western. Here, we say in our creed that we believe in “the Holy Spirit....who proceeds from the Father and the Son” – i.e. that he also is co-equal.

The theologian Tertullian in the 2nd century made up the words which we now use to describe various aspects of the Trinity (!). He made up the very word 'Trinitas' (in Latin), and 'persona' and 'substantia'. His word 'persona' was a translation of the Greek word 'hypostasis' which was the word for a mask worn by actors. Perhaps he thought of God performing different roles and wearing the mask of each. Another word, 'substantia' describes the unity of God despite the different ways he has been revealed to us in Scripture. This is what the 3 persons have in common. And one final word: 'perichoresis'. This means 'mutual inter-penetration'. Each member of the Trinity not only shares the same substance, but they are mutually penetrating each other all the time. This is like a 'dance', moving in and out of each other constantly, changing, all the time existing together and yet doing things in their own right.

I hope I haven't lost you! There is a reason for all of this academia.

The reason for it is that I think it's helpful for our understanding of the Trinity. The Doctrine of the Trinity was developed by theologians; therefore, to have even a bit of understanding, we have to delve into theology.

It's not enough for us just to have in our minds a few visual aids – one or two come to mind, which I myself have used over the years(!). For example, I once tied three differently coloured ribbons to the pulpit (at Woodmansey) and plaited them together, to show that God was made up of three parts and was therefore stronger together. Or, we may have all heard of the 'water, ice, steam' metaphor – God is the same (what these three have in common, their 'substance' is H<sub>2</sub>O) but exists in three different forms. Or the image of one person with three roles – eg. daughter, wife and mother.

Some of these modern visual aids can actually be misrepresenting the Trinity. There are some heresies identified around this teaching. One is called 'modalism', when God is thought to have been different at different periods of history – he was first the Creator, in the beginning; then he appeared as Jesus, in the Gospels; then finally he appeared as the Holy Spirit. This takes away the ability of God to be *all three at once*; as does the visual aid about water, ice and steam.

Another heresy is called 'tritheism', which describes God as existing as three equal but independant, autonomous beings. The three coloured pieces of ribbon would be an illustration of this heresy.

In fact out of the three visual aids that I quoted, I think the only one that stands up to theological scrutiny is the 'daughter, wife and mother' idea. This is because a person (like me) *can* be these three people *at the same time*. Although she may be acting out the role of any of them at any one time, she *is* the others whilst she's doing it.

Of course, some of you might have just spotted something that makes a huge difference with God – he does not operate within time, as we do. He is Eternal. Outside of time. So of course he can *be* three different beings *at the same time* – because this last bit doesn't apply to him! He just *IS*.

The bit of Trinitarian theology which is the most interesting for us today, I think, is the idea of 'perichoresis' – remember, that word that means 'mutual inter-penetration'. Each member of the Trinity sharing the same substance and mutually penetrating each other all the time; like a 'dance', moving in and out of each other constantly, changing, all the time existing together and yet doing things in their own right.

The Trinity is a community. It's about relationship. And **THIS** is the theological sense we can get from it. **THIS** is what it has to do with our lives now.

If you read the Bible, you will get to know about the ebb and flow in relationship between God the Father (or Creator), his breath (or Spirit), and his word (or his Son). And you'll get to know about the relationship between these three beings and humanity. That's what the Bible's all about. The relationships – good, bad and indifferent – between these people.

And it's this that we as Christians are also involved with. WE are part of the ebb and flow of relationship between the Trinity and humanity; between us and God and us and other people and God and other people. A three-way relationship.

The Spirit enables us to know Jesus, and to become a believer; He helps us to worship and pray; he gives us spiritual insight into what this believing thing is all about.

Jesus shows us the Father, the Creator; he demonstrates his character, so that we can know him and relate to him.

And God the Father is the one who Created us all, with his breath, and who carries on creating every day. He created us to live with each other, and with him.

In conclusion, then, is this how we experience God?

Can we say that, like the first Christians in the New Testament, you have known “the Father, revealed in Christ, through the Spirit”?

God has been revealed in the Bible to us as acting in different yet complementary ways. In our own Christian lives we can know the activity of the Holy Spirit, in pointing us to Jesus; and that we can know the character of God by knowing Jesus for ourselves.

These three beings have always been there. They are dancing with each other still, encouraging us to enter into the dance with them. We can know life in all its abundance because we are dancing with the Trinity.

If we can say ‘yes’ to this experience, then we can confidently be his witnesses, making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; remembering that the Trinity is with us to the end of the age.

Amen.