

-Sunday - 27th May 2018 - 9.15 am – The Apostles’ Creed – Trinity

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’

Mark 1. 9-11

Ephesians 1. 1-14

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

If I’m looking a bit pale this morning it’s because I have been thinking about some big questions this week. Two in fact - Who is God? and Where is God? The latter subject came about as a result of being in school on Wednesday for their Spirited Arts Day. The idea was for each child to use art to express where they find God. It was a great day. It was asking each child to see God in the everyday around them. Year 3 went to Fishponds to find him there, to the Co-op and in here as part of Open Church. I wonder what you would have sketched or painted, collaged or modelled if you had spent Wednesday thinking Where God is for you

And this week I have been thinking about the other pretty big question ‘Who is God’ in preparation for this morning. In our sermon series on the Apostle’s Creed we have got a bit out of order. We thought last week at Pentecost about the line in the Creed ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’. We thought of those five symbols of the Holy Spirit – fire, wind, water, oil and a dove to help understand more of the Holy Spirit. And at the end we just began to think about the Holy Spirit being in relation with the Father and the Son and that brought us into thinking of the Trinity. And so here we are at Trinity Sunday following as it does after Pentecost – although Trinity Sunday itself is an invention in the Christian Calendar which came in as late as the 1300’s.

In some ways celebrating Trinity Sunday could be seen as a further diversion from our exploration of the Creed. For the word isn’t mentioned in the Creed. But, belief in it is the very basis of it. As set out on the yellow card, you can see the Creed itself is divided into three sections. So whilst there is no use of the word or explicit affirmation of the Trinity in the Creed it is the very basis of it.

And you could say the same about Scripture itself. Nowhere in the Bible, Old or New Testament is the word ‘Trinity’ used. But you can see it through out, if you have eyes to see it. As one writer put it, *‘The encounter with God as Trinity is both shockingly new and yet somehow characteristic of the God already revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures’*.

In Genesis we see God as Almighty Creator with the Spirit of God alongside – hovering over the surface of the waters. Throughout the Old Testament there is reference to God's spirit and indeed prophecies of the Messiah who will come to earth. And then in the New Testament Jesus Christ, Son of God is born on earth and after he has lived, been crucified, dead, resurrected and then ascended his eventual absence makes space for the Holy Spirit to come to the world.

So we have Father Son and Holy Spirit but how are we to understand them together as Trinity? I'm going to suggest three different ways to think about the Trinity in the hope that one may have a special resonance for you and different ones will work for different people. One is through words, one an image and the other through looking for the outworking of the Trinity today; firstly by what is known as the Athanasian Creed, second the image of Jesus' baptism and the third looking with dynamic understanding.

The Athanasian Creed is poorly named - not really a Creed and not written by Athanasius! He was an early church man and scholar of the fourth century who was central to controversies about right thinking and heresy (wrong thinking) about Jesus and in particular about whether Jesus was of the same substance as God or not. He guarded carefully the nature of the Trinity and what many years later became called the Athanasian Creed was something of a summary of the beliefs with which he was closely associated. It's not the work of a Council or a series of central church discussions, so don't think of this 'Creed' as being on a par with the Apostle's or Nicene Creed which we have previously thought about but it does explicitly speak of the Trinity. So – here's an extract . . . and after this it should all be clear . .

[Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That] we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Spirit unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almightyes; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So

likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. . . . *and it continues a bit later* . . . There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity Amen

Job done! That's the Trinity! Each 'person' of the Trinity is uncreated, limitless, eternal and omnipotent – always three but always one. In SO many words!

If you're struggling to get your head round all of that, perhaps we should come to our gospel reading to provide us with a picture of the Trinity. We heard the story of Jesus being baptised at the River Jordan by John. Jesus goes under the water and as he comes up the heavens are torn open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove and there is the voice of the Father saying '*This is my dear, dear child, I am delighted with you*'. God the Father says about Jesus '*This is my dear, dear child, I am delighted with you*'. Father Son and Holy Spirit all in one place together – communicating and in relationship. A picture of the Trinity – there at the beginning of the gospel of Mark. And if that communicating and relationship speaks of anything, it speaks of love. As one writer puts it '*If God is love then he is at once the lover, the beloved and the love*'. We can see that in this picture so clearly – the lover, the beloved and the love.

Finally let us think a little about the Trinity as being about space and about energies in the way that the writer Jürgen Moltmann encourages us to do. He wrote much in the last half of the twentieth century about the Trinity and has shaped our modern understanding of it. He suggested that a commitment to the truth of the Trinity would reshape how we understand God and entirely re-shape how we do church. He said this:

'Once [] we believe in the triune God, the acts of Christians in church and political life are determined by the discipleship of the crucified Christ and life in the Spirit of God, not through obedience to the powers that be and loyalty to one's own country and people. [p 304 Experiences in Theology]

He saw the three fold nature of God as putting aside what we would now think of as a rather archaic view of God, although it's one to which we still might be tempted to cling. Holding up Jesus Christ who suffered on the cross for us and for our sins and the Spirit whose work in the world is to help us to become more Christ-like, holding those up as equal energies of God, we no longer have a God who is singular, authoritarian and male. That's a truth which came out clearly for those of us who read the best-seller or saw the film some years ago, 'The Shack'. God is firmly relational. And remember that some of the pioneers of this work which Moltmann went on to explore later, seeking to make God more complex and relational, were first putting forward such thinking in Germany in the mid 1930's when blind allegiance to a single authoritarian male figure was tightening its grip on a nation, with the approval or at least acquiescence of part of the state church.

And so Moltmann wrote that '*the Trinity is a mutual indwelling where energy is shared.*' Mutual indwelling gives us that sense of complete inter-dependability which we got from the words of the Athanasian Creed; that they not only each communicate and confer, connect and coalesce together but separately and that they share energy one in three and three in one.

But if the Trinity is about energies, Moltmann then went on to say that '*each Trinitarian person is not merely Person but also living space for the two others.*' The Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also as energy and space. Energy to keep engaging with each other and with us and energy to empower us. . . . And space. . . . space which allows us to enter into the Trinity. It's not a tightly packed knot of three. Indeed in the celtic knot [draw it out] which consists of those three interlinked shapes and which is often used as a helpful symbol of the Trinity, the space between is as important as the lines in seeing the shape of the whole. The space defines the shapes and allows us spaces within to be.

And it is that entering in, that invitation to enter into the life of the Trinity which is the best part for us today. Because that brings us back to relationships and love. The words of the Athanasian Creed whilst attempting to define the Trinity with precision, missed out on that. The image of Jesus' baptism captured it completely. Understanding Trinity as being dynamic - about energies and space as much as about 'persons' provides us with an invitation to enter into its life, if we but choose to accept. And so I want to leave (almost) the last word to Moltmann again –

If Trinity is a code word for the history of God's love with his world, then its historical character becomes understandable, for as long as love is alive, in it there is wooing and longing, losing and suffering, seeking and finding.

That's the God which is reaching out to be in relationship with us – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *Amen [p145 KMF]*