

Readings Deuteronomy 4:32-40
Romans 8:14-17
Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon: Chris Mostetert

Trinity Sunday – Year B

Theme ‘Make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them ...’ (Matt 28:19f.)

[A] Introduction

In the three biblical passages set for reading on Trinity Sunday in this middle year of the lectionary we have three very different angles on the holy mystery whom we name and worship as the **one God** of all creation.

In the reading from **Deuteronomy** Moses reminds the people of *Israel* of an earlier experience of God. God had singled out this people for rescue and liberation. The living God had spoken from within a burning bush. Now he (*Moses*) is about to reveal to them the commandments of God.

The passage from Paul’s letter to the **Romans** is a key passage showing a *trinitarian* pattern: bringing together a reference to God the **Father**, to **Jesus Christ**, *through* whom and *with* whom we are heirs of God (and all that God has to give us), and to the **Spirit**, who helps and guides us to live as children of God.

The Gospel for today is the final five verses of the Gospel according to **Matthew**: the most explicitly trinitarian passage in the whole of the NT. It is the great commission to the disciples to go out to all the nations, to teach them and to baptise them ‘in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a remarkable instruction, obviously reflecting a practice of baptism in the name of the **Trinity** well before the end of the 1st century, even though the *earliest* Christian baptisms had been simply in the name of **Jesus**.

[B] Knowing God

But can we really know that God is the *Holy Trinity*? Might we not be claiming too much? Claiming too much knowledge about God can easily lead to fundamentalism and dogmatism; not a good thing!! **Nicholas Lash**, a distinguished Cambridge theologian, remarks – with support from **Aquinas** – that if we think we can have God in our conceptual or imaginative sights, we can’t be thinking about *God*. [TFP, 57] He also quotes a good piece of advice from the philosopher, **Wittgenstein**: ‘Never allow yourself to become *too familiar* with holy things.’ [66]

Now God is not a ‘holy *thing*’; God is ‘holy *mystery*’, or as our ancestors, the Jews, would say, ‘the Holy *One* of Israel’. [2 Ki 19:22; Isa 1:4] Isaiah’s great vision of God [ch 6] encourages acclamation: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!’ That is the language of *adoration*; safer than too much *description* of the Holy One! Yet *speaking* about God we must, despite the peril of speaking about what we cannot fully know. We have to find a middle way between two truths: that we cannot fathom the deep mystery of God’s being and that God has actually made Godself known: in the world of nature; in the history of the Covenant people and in the person of Jesus Christ.

[C] God the Holy Trinity

On this day throughout the church we are encouraged to reflect on the truth that the **Holy One** is also the **Holy Three**, classically known as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three trinitarian ‘Persons’. Many texts in the NT provided the raw materials for the *doctrine* of the Trinity. The NT has a ‘trinitarian *groundplan*’, as it were, which was built upon in subsequent theological reflection.

In the simplest terms, the argument runs like this: if God works in the world in a three-fold way – the ancients said ‘in a trinitarian *economy*’ – then God must actually be triune). If in creation and salvation God works as Father, Son and Spirit, then we must think about God’s being according to the same pattern. If, as the 4th Gospel repeatedly says, the *Father* and the *Son* are inseparably united – and if to have seen the *Son* is to have seen the *Father* – then God must **be** Father, Son (and, by extension, Holy Spirit).

It isn’t a big step from there to say that God is *relational* in God’s very being; that God is a communion of Father, Son and Spirit; a *communion* of three Persons. Of course, the *divine* Persons are not like *human* persons! If we thought of the divine Persons as we do about *human* persons, we would end up believing in three gods, which we don’t. The Greeks used a very philosophical term which, through translation into Latin came into English as the word ‘*person*’. Of course, no *human* vocabulary in any language will ever be adequate for speaking of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity claims to speak *truly* of God: God **is** triune. But it also serves as a grammar to help us to speak as adequately as possible in the challenging business of speaking about God at all! So to think trinitarianly of God helps us to avoid thinking too narrowly about God: only about the *Creator*; only about *Jesus* as human; or only about a

vague spiritual something. Since each of the three ‘Persons’ of the Trinity is intimately related to the other two, to speak of one must involve in speaking of the other two. We can’t think adequately about **Jesus** if we don’t think of his relation to God the **Father** and his relation to God the **Spirit**. Not to think *trinitarianly* about God or not to worship God *trinitarianly* will most likely lead to *inadequate* talk or worship of God.

[D] The Trinity and the Christian life

Despite its importance, this doctrine of the Trinity has been marginalised. It’s often regarded as an irrelevant piece of abstraction, having no relation at all to our lives as people of faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is indeed a *technical vocabulary* about the trinitarian Persons and their mutual relations: its helpful for thinking about some complex questions. But the doctrine of the Trinity has everything to do with *living* the faith and *relating* to God in our life and in our worship.

Let me quote three lines from an English theologian (**Mike Higton**) [Chr Doctr, 90]:

(1) *To know* God is to be drawn into that love and justice that has its *origin* in the **Father**.

(2) *To know* God is to be drawn into that love in which we are *formed* by being *con-formed* to the **Son**, who acts out that love in a form that we can know.

(3) *To know* God is to be drawn into that Christ-like love that is *formed* in us by the working of the **Spirit**, who *conforms* us to the love that unites the **Father** and the **Son**.

It is in relation to *this* God – and *in* this *triune* God – that we have live and move and have our being. It is *this* God with whom all things have their beginning; *this* God into whose service **we**, with **Moses**, with the **disciples** and with **St Paul**, are called.

It is *this* God who, in the person of **Jesus Christ**, entered into solidarity with us in our suffering and in the brokenness of sin; *this* God who in the person of the Son has been ‘lifted up’ so that humankind might have eternal life, and who has made us joint heirs with **Christ** of the promise of adoption as God’s children.

It is *this* God who, through the **Holy Spirit**, gives us a new birth and a new life, and who accompanies and energises us each day for the praise and service of God. It is the Spirit who transforms our *present* life with the new life of God’s promised *future*, and who will give new form to this world, so that it will reflect more clearly the glory of God.

[E] Conclusion

Trinity Sunday encourages us to reflect on the very *being* of God who engages in the great work of creation and redemption and has promised to bring it to a glorious perfection. This **God** who is triune, one God in three Persons, is the One whom it is our joyful duty to worship and praise, and whose purpose in creation gives shape to our lives.

About this God we can only *stammer* a few incoherent words, for God far transcends every concept by which we might bring God to thought and speech. But talking about **God** has to do not just with *ideas* but more with *life*. And in the one place where the Father, the Son and the Spirit are named together in one sentence **Jesus** gives his disciples a commission. ‘Go and make disciples in all nations! Teach people! Baptise them – in this *triune* name!’

The church goes on doing this, in almost every place. It can do so only because this three-personed God *commissions* it, and *empowers* it, and *accompanies* it until the task is completed.

Thanks be to God, *from* whom, *in* whom and *for* whom are all things.
