

Sermon Trinity Sunday Year C 2022

Glory be to the holy, the Consubstantial, undivided, and life-giving Trinity, who was, and is, and who ever shall be. Amen.

By the grace of Providence, today we are able to celebrate (with Jeremy and Claire and little Eden) one of *the smallest* of God's wonders, even as we are able to celebrate *the greatest* of wonders in the mystery of God himself, revealed to us as Trinity. It is the sure wisdom of Holy Mother Church that in the echo of the Easter Season, and then in the afterwash of Pentecost, we turn our minds to the defining doctrine of our faith, that of the Holy Trinity. After the season which centres our attention on the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then a day focusing on the Holy Spirit, we appropriately consider the Trinity because both these (the saving work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) are mysteries which flow from the very mystery of the Trinity. The mystery we celebrate today, then, rightly crowns all the sublime mysteries we have been recalling these past two months.

The great German protestant Theologian, Karl Barth did much to recover classical theology in the West from the onslaughts of 18th and 19th-century liberalism. He understood that faith in the Trinity was really the hinge point of all Christian doctrine. He wrote, *The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian...in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God.* In other words, the Trinity is what makes us Christian. It is what makes sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons non-Christian. They do not believe in the Trinity. And it shows how the claim that Muslims and Christians 'really believe in the same God' is false. Correct and orthodox faith in the Trinity is not incidental to our faith, it is at the very heart of our faith. It is what distinguishes our faith. Without faith in the Trinity, there is no Christian faith.

It is so central quite simply because it reveals the ultimate truth, the nature of ultimate reality, the very nature of God. If we are not saying the right things about God, then everything else crumbles! Now, it is important to say that the doctrine of the Trinity does not define God. It does not exhaust the mystery of God. But it does truly *reveal* God. And, the other Mysteries of our faith – the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – tell us what God has done *in time*. But the Mystery of the Trinity tells us what God is *in eternity*.

As liturgical Anglicans, our very worship helps guard and protect a right understanding of the Trinity. The correct orientation of our prayer (to the Father through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit); the careful creedal formulas; the fulsome readings of the bible which place before us the full scope of God's saving action; invoking the very name of God - Father, Son and the Holy Spirit - at the commencement and end of most prayer; the Persons sharing equal honour in our prayer (Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit) all work together to reinforce orthodox Trinitarian faith. Yet still, for perhaps more than a few of us, there remains a niggling doubt: *isn't it all a bit too abstract, and in fact not actually biblical? 'Trinity' isn't even mentioned in the bible, so how can it possibly be so central?...* Accepting orthodox Christian faith on this question - of Three Persons in One God - may seem strange and even shocking, in part because there is little (if anything) to adequately compare it to. It stretches all our categories.

But we should not be surprised that the real God surprises us! Even the world around us shocks and surprises us. Daring new discoveries in the field of science - whether it be physics or medicine or astronomy - can be truly startling. But new discoveries, though, are always in response to the data, to the evidence that has become clear. And in fact, the science of theology arises in a similar way to any other science - *from the data* - and the need to explain and understand the data. The church gradually defined the doctrine of the Trinity, in her first six ecumenical councils (to which Anglicans subscribe) to help explain her data in scripture. Theology, of course, has different data from other sciences. That also should not surprise us. We are asking *different questions*, so the data comes from different sources. But it works in the same principle, that the data control the theory and not the other way around!

The principal source of data for Christian theology is of course Christ himself. The record that bears witness to him tells us that he claimed to be one with the Father, that he was equal in glory with the Father, that he had always existed, that he was worthy of the same honour and worship as the Father, and that he promised to send the Spirit. It is the church's reflection on the witness of the scripture that leads us to assert faith in the Trinity. So, in the bible we see that there is only one God, *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One* (Deut 6:4). But also that the Father is God (John 5:18), that the Son is God (John 8:58) and that the Holy Spirit is God (Mt 28:19).

As we look at the record of scripture, we see how God *progressively* reveals himself. First as the transcendent creator 'outside us'; then as the Incarnate saviour 'beside us' and then as the indwelling Spirit 'inside us'. Now, this progression is not of God 'appearing' in a different way, putting on a different 'mask' in different stages of revelation history, as if one God in three 'modes'; as if He 'appears' in one way, and then another, and finally a third. That is the modalist heresy the church has roundly condemned. No, God reveals himself as Persons, not modes, first as Father in the Old Testament, then as Son in the Gospels, and finally as the Spirit (in the Acts of the Apostles and in the church). The *reason* for this progression is found in God's very being, which as the first letter of John tells us, is simply love. God in God's very being is love. His purpose and motive for revealing himself to humankind is love. And love's aim is always greater intimacy, deeper union with the beloved. So, the stages of God's self-disclosure are stages of increasing intimacy from outside, to beside, to inside.

The reason we can affirm and assert that God is Trinity is precisely because we understand God as love. Love requires 'three-ness': the lover, the beloved and the relationship of love between them. God is Trinity because God is love itself in its completeness. And this is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. It is important because it makes more concrete and practical difference to our lives than we can imagine. The Trinity is not just a clever idea thought up by theologians with too much time on their hands. It wasn't invented in the third century to try and be intentionally obscure. And it isn't something to just park to one side to not really disturb or impact us. It impacts us precisely because it tells us what God is like in God's own life! Because God is Trinity, God is love. And because God is love, love is the supreme value. Because love is the supreme value, it is the meaning of our lives *because we are created in God's image and likeness*. And love, not in a sappy, silly, sentimental sense. And not love as romance or desire, which is a cheapening and oftentimes a parody of love, or even blasphemy against love. But love as we see in Jesus, *who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave*. Jesus shows us love as sacrifice, as self-giving. The Incarnate word of God gave of himself for the life of the world by dying on the Cross. The evidence we are dealing with - the data we work from - shows us the God we confess and believe: the God of perfect love. The fact that God is Trinity is the reason why love is the meaning of life. And the reason nothing will fulfil us more than love is because that is inscribed into our very design. Amen.