

Sermon Trinity Sunday Year A 2020

Both the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark recount the little story of ‘some Pharisees and Herodians’ coming to Jesus with a question to test him. ‘Is it lawful’ they ask, ‘to pay taxes to Caesar or not.’ Jesus, we are told, discerns their hypocrisy. He asks them to bring to him a coin, a denarius. Jesus asks them, ‘whose head and whose title is this?’ In the Authorised Version, it translates, *whose image and superscription?* The answer, of course, being Caesar. And Jesus replies, ‘give/render, therefore to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God.’

Now, this illustrative story may seem an odd one in which to commence a reflection on this feast of the Holy Trinity. Except that an important principle is laid out here. For sure, commentators and preachers have long regarded this passage as an argument for good citizenry and for paying taxes. Since Justin Martyr from the second century onward, the passage has been regarded as justifying compliance to the demands of the state. Certainly, we have known something of that these past months...

But of course, the principal concern of the New Testament is *not* how to conform us into being good, law-abiding citizens, who pay our dues and to simply do as we are told. In the New Testament world of the first century quite the reverse was true! The New Testament is about affirming the Lordship of Jesus Christ and unpacking the implications of that. The implications are that very often we cannot pay Caesar his dues! To confess Christ’s lordship means people of faith often cannot, in good conscience, comply with Empire’s demands. Governing authorities hate few things more than competing claims to absolute allegiance. Faithful Christians the whole of our 2000-year history have lived with the implications of that.

The key to this little passage, then, is not so much *render unto the Caesar the things of Caesar*, but, *whose image and inscription is this?* At the most basic, essential level, Christians follow the Jewish insight that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. In the very first chapter of Genesis we read, *So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* We are all – the entire human family - impressed, stamped, with the image of God. Whose inscription, whose image do we bear? The Christian must answer, God’s! To God, then, is our most basic and essential allegiance owed. The human story, then, is really the story of how slow and reluctant we are to ‘pay up’. The story of the saints, on the other hand, the story of those who recognise this truth utterly.

In the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we come to know who this God is. In Jesus, God chooses a face for himself. In Jesus we are shown how God can be known, encountered, loved and adored. In this revelation, God is shown to be Trinity. So, if we are God's, if we bear his image by his gift of creation, it is, then, a Trinitarian image. Trinity Sunday is a celebration of the image and mark with which we, as Christians are pressed with. Trinity shows us whose we and who we are. We are *people* of the Trinity. We *belong* to the Trinity. The Trinity shows us both our origin and our destiny. And Trinity is to shape our life here and now.

This is why - in obedience to Christ's own command - we are baptised in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is how the image of the God revealed in Jesus is *impressed* upon us. We become Christian literally by water being poured in the name of Triune God. Now, perhaps we consider the waters of baptism to be something a soothing bath. Instead we should see baptism as a branding, a searing tattoo even! Water poured in the Name of Trinity brands us, indelibly marks us, for the Trinity. The image we bear is the image of the Triune God. This is the image that shows us whose we are and who we are. And set apart so that we can know God, love and adore him. And we do this most perfectly in our worship. The worship we partake of here on earth simply anticipating the eternal worship of the Triune God in heaven.

This is why every act of Christian worship ought to commence with the invocation of the Name of Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit *is* God's name. It is that Name by which we gather. In that Name we have authority and confidence to act. It means that when we invoke the Holy Name of the eternal, Triune God there ought to be a certain solemnity and seriousness in what we attempt to do in that Name. Not sombre and morose (for which today seriousness and solemnity now get conflated and confused). Our faith still inspires joy! But when we invoke the name of God in worship it is not for a social catch up, or for a community building exercise or even primarily for instruction. No. It means we are attempting - even if falteringly and imperfectly - to peer past the cherubim and seraphim, to the very throne of God. Because of God's gift of himself in Jesus Christ, and in power of the Holy Spirit, God, if you like, steps past the curtain. He comes to us. He visits us, here and now. He deigns to actually listen to our prayers. When we say *God come to us*, he comes! We invoke his Name - the name of Blessed, Holy and Undivided Trinity - and he shows himself to us. Because we are his. We bear his mark. We belong to him.

That's why *every* Sunday is really Trinity Sunday. That's why every act of worship is Trinitarian. That's why the very shape of Christian prayer – the most basic and most solemn duty of every believer - is Trinitarian in shape: to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This feast, then, simply seeks to bring to prominence - to bring forward - what in many ways is the very foundation of our faith.

So, to ignore, suppress or compromise faith in the Trinity, is to ignore, suppress and compromise the very heart and soul of Christian identity. To try and undermine and subvert the fullness of Trinitarian faith is an attempt to scrub out the mark we bear. Subverting Trinitarian faith shows itself by trying to cover up the image impressed on us. The consistent feature of all the heresies that have sought to undermine orthodox faith is that they all have an impoverished Trinitarian theology. They have all proved themselves remarkably resilient. They keep reappearing, even in our day and age. But whether the Arians, Docetics, Nestorians, Adoptionists, Marcionites, Donatists, Pelagianists or Gnostics they all fall on this: a failure to apprehend the radical implications of the Trinity. All the substitutes and all the alternatives to orthodox Christian faith fail to accept the true cost of the image we bear.

The great Mystery we recall today is not some obscure bit of medieval philosophising. Trinity is not some complicating add-on to a pure and simple but now lost primitive faith. It is of the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. This cannot be overstated enough! It is the fruit of the church's reflection on the revelation of Jesus Christ and of the trust in the Holy Spirit who would *lead to all truth*. The long story of the creeds and councils of the church - to which Anglicans are at least supposed to subscribe – is in large measure the story of illuminating and preserving Trinitarian faith. And Trinity is not some obscure theory. The long instinct of the church has been that this doctrine is imminently *practical*. The God whom we believe exists in unity and diversity, who is a Communion of Persons dwelling in perfect love, explains why we seek to live as community of love, why we seek to exist in unity and diversity.

Christians need not be fearful of this defining mystery. It is not a problem to be solved but a truth to be experienced. The Trinity is the mark of what makes us Christian. It is the mark we remind ourselves of each time we baptise, each time we pray, each time we gather in worship. Each time we even make the simple sign of the Cross and invoke the Holy Name of God, we bear witness to the image we bear. And in these we show whose we are and who we are. Amen.