

Sermon Feast of the Holy Trinity Year B 2021

In this peculiar (though now familiar) situation we find ourselves in yet again, I suspect that for many of us all those feelings and experiences of isolation and separation, of loneliness and distance all come to the surface once more. How important it is, then, to draw on the wisdom and instinct of the church which always pushes against those tides, whenever and however they appear. Ours is a communal faith. Ours is a shared faith. Community and belonging are central elements of our faith. And not only to Christian living but also Christian believing. You cannot be a Christian on our own.

Our faith is a shared faith, and Christian life and belief is not a case of ‘make your own religion’. As a reminder of that, the Creed is put to us week by week, as a remedy against individualism, a safeguard against worshipping at the golden calf of the self. Now, the Creed, such as we have just recited, is a somewhat late addition to Eucharistic worship. Though the text was settled upon in the fourth century its core reaches back to the Apostolic Age. As the church grew and became more international and diverse and complex - encompassing so many peoples and cultures and languages – the Creed was proposed as the framework which both holds the church catholic together and out of which we can live our differences. So, the Creed works not only to counter heresy and inauthentic expressions of faith. It also serves unify, to strengthen in us the understanding that we indeed are part of the church universal.

When it comes to the defining belief of our faith – the Trinity – we ought appreciate, that even with our many differences, we come at it with an agreed and shared starting point. The great early-20th century German theologian Karl Barth was at the forefront of the revival in Trinitarian thought. For 200 years or so enlightenment and natural theology had dominated western thought in this area. The horrors of WWI saw confidence in human capacity come to a thumping end. And Barth led the way to reclaiming and reasserting classic Christianity. He argued that, ‘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’.

For more than two billion Christians, the Nicene Creed is the definitive account of the doctrine of the Trinity. These 2 billion believers agree that anyone who denies what is taught in the Nicene Creed really stands outside the faith catholic, and any community of Christians that rejects what the Nicene Creed teaches is by definition a sect of

Christianity. Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, and others like them, cannot be accepted as orthodox Christians because they cannot confess this creed.

Now, to be clear, the Nicene Creed, or any other creed or confession, is not placed above Scripture in authority or even on an equal basis with Scripture. But for 2 billion Christians, this creed expresses what the church has agreed is the teaching of Scripture. The creed is a summary statement, if you like, and draws together the fruitful and careful reflections on the witness of Scripture. In other words, nothing is said in the Creed that is not said in the Bible. Every single statement in the Creed reflects what the Bible says or implies. And so, we have in this creed the most authoritative interpretation of what Scripture teaches on the nature of the Trinity.

Now our natural tendency might be to recoil from the mystery of what we celebrate today. Perhaps we think it is all too abstract and complex and so best to say nothing at all. But while we are rightly humble before the Mystery, silence in this instance is in fact *not* the correct response. Something *can* be said about the Triune God because God *himself* has said something about it. The central platform of Christian faith is that God is *not* content to remain distant, unknown. He does not want to remain separate from his creatures, leaving us in ignorance. The central conviction upon which the entire scriptural record depends is that God *has* shown himself, he reveals himself.

A key way we understand the Trinity, as reflected in Scripture and expressed in the Creed, is that the way God is in his own life - that is, the way God exists in himself - is the same way that God reveals himself through salvation history. God, as a Communion of Persons, equal in dignity and glory, is exactly the God that has been revealed to us. There is not God who exists in a different way to the way he has revealed himself to humankind. To know and understand God is to discern his presence and action through the story of salvation.

It is this same conviction that lay behind the reading today from Deuteronomy: God acts through history, we can discern his fingerprint, he can be known, he speaks to us and shows himself to us. The reading today ends, *keep all his statutes and commandments...that it may go well with you, and with your children after you*. The point being we should listen to and obey God because God is the only one worthy of our devotion. God is worthy of our devotion, to be listened to and obeyed, precisely because he has shown himself as God the creator, the holy God, the true God. The

People of God can have confidence in these claims because of the way he has shown himself: in the burning bush, on Mt Sinai, as the one who saves and delivers his people. The writer of Deuteronomy reminds that Israel was *witness* to these deeds, that they might know that *the Lord is God; there is no other beside him*.

God takes the initiative to show us what God is like. And as Christians this definitive act of self-disclosure occurs in the person Jesus Christ. We might hesitate at the mystery, but God steps up to us to reassure us. It is this very idea that is reflected in the gospel today. The disciples, after the resurrection of the Lord, gathered upon the mountain to which the Lord had appointed. And we are told, *some worshipped and others doubted* (a perfect summary of the variety of the responses to the Lord Christ, even to this day!). And we are told the Lord Christ *came to them*. He stepped before them. He comes, and before both worship and doubt, he appears. He steps forward. Again, he takes the initiative. And this one sentence encapsulates the entire mystery of the Incarnation, and indeed the whole truth of the mystery we celebrate today: *God shows himself to us*. We can know what God is like, because he has taken the step toward us. And it is the sustained and careful reflection of his revelation that the church understands as Trinity. We come to that conclusion, we make that bold, unique assertion, simply from the evidence God has been showing us all along.

Jesus says in the Gospel, *'all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me'*. This is Jesus the exalted one, the ruler and judge of all. It is the climax of the gospel, the culmination of all that Matthew's story has been leading up to. But this story also ends as it began: *'I am with you always, to the end of the age'*. At the start of the Gospel, we are told the child would be called Immanuel, *God-with-us*. But the promise is the same: that God, the high and hidden one, who is beyond all words and images, the creator of the world and the holy one of Israel, has stepped before us, is present to us forever. My brothers and sisters, faith in the Trinity is not a problem to be solved, or a mathematical equation to be answered much less a mystery to be avoided. It is the distinct mark of faith for 2 billion believers because it is what God himself has shown us. Listening to his voice and recognizing his action in the world leads us to see that God is Trinity. We can have confidence that the God who has revealed himself as creator, redeemer, sustainer is the one God we worship and adore. To God who is Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all might, majesty, dominion and power now and to the end of ages. Amen.