

Trinity Sunday Sermon

The Trinity has long been ridiculed. Isaac Newton the great physicist who theorised about gravity in the seventeenth century was against it. The Jehovah Witnesses claim to be a Christian group that does not believe in the Trinity as the way that God has self-identified. I guess it is also true that many people today, both church attenders and others, find it hard to make much sense of the Trinity. So, in view of this situation, I want to try to bring some clarity about why the church believes that God is Trinity - that is to say why the One God is confessed to be a unity of three divine persons.

We cannot and should not begin our thinking about the Trinity with the church's creedal phrase, "I believe One God in three Persons". If we do that we will repeat a mistake that the church has often made. We will present the Trinity as something that has to be believed, rather than seeing that it is the living focus of divine life in the world. We have to begin, instead, with the experience of people. Specifically we have to begin with the first Christians meeting in Jerusalem shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. We can do this by asking the question: who is that that they incredulously found themselves saying had encountered them? Or, to put this question in a more theological form, we can ask: Who did they identify as the dramatic characters that revealed the drama of God's gracious dealings with his creatures?

It is quite clear that the community in Jerusalem were convinced that they were encountered by a resurrected Jesus after his crucifixion. This encounter raised at least two questions. The first question arose because of their conviction that *someone* had raised Jesus from the dead. Who was that agent? The obvious candidate as the one who raised Jesus from the dead was, for these Jews, the same one that had led the Israelites out of the death of slavery in Egypt, the One called Yahweh, the One who had created a people out of nothing. Clearly to their thinking Yahweh had again created out of the nothingness of death by raising Jesus to new life. They saw that this was the One to whom Jesus had prayed - this was the divine agent he had called *abba*, Father. It seemed clear to the community, therefore, that the momentous and game-changing event of the resurrection was the gracious work of Yahweh whom Jesus had addressed intimately as 'Father'.

A second question was this: what did the resurrection of Jesus say about *his* identity? Just *who* is this Jesus that the Father raised from the dead? On the one hand they knew Jesus as a man, a human being as we are. But, on the other hand, some other things just had to be said. Jesus, during his ministry, thought that the kingdom, or new world order that the Jews expected God to establish, was present in all its power and might in his words and actions. He promised life in the new world to the wicked. This was something that only God could do. He probably identified himself as a cosmic messenger of God. For the first Christ community in Jerusalem the resurrection was understood as confirming these claims to be true. This is to say that the resurrected Christ was confirmation of the presence of God's grace and the dawning of God's new order in the man Jesus of Nazareth. It seemed to the early Christ communities that if the resurrection did confirm the claims that Jesus made during his ministry, then they had had to do with the personal presence of God in their time with Jesus. And if this was the case then Christ Jesus is an essential part of the reality that the word 'God' signifies.

Last week at Pentecost we spoke about a divine agency that becomes creatively involved in human lives by cooperating with our abilities. This agency turns our attention to Jesus Christ and the future that is God's purpose for humanity. The Spirit turns our attention to the suffering of humanity and binds us in solidarity with the purpose of God to heal and transform humanity and the world that sustains our lives. This agency works miracles in people by enabling people to decide for the cross that is God's transforming powerlessness. My own view of the Spirit is that we know the trace of "his" or "her" presence as we reflect on events in our lives that, in retrospect, are extraordinary in their ordinariness because in them we were moved towards becoming more human and humane in some approximation to what the Trinity began to accomplish in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. In this reflection on the past that has shaped our present, the trace of the Spirit can be called personal because we do not remember an agency whose action was mechanical or jarringly foreign to us. Yet, at the same time, it was an agency that was different to me and the community of which I am a part, and different to the action of other people upon me.

What I have tried to show is that the Christ community at its beginning, and in its ongoing life, was aware of three characters in the drama of God's involvement with men and women

and his creation. Over three centuries it reflected on these matters. Were the three characters aspects, or modes, of the personality of the one God? There were Christians who said this. They were known as modalists. The church as a whole came to a different view as it reflected on the characters. It saw them as three distinct divine Persons who are one. What made them one was their relationship to another. This is a relationship in which each is in perfect communion with each other. This is to say that their purpose is common, and each one exalts or builds up the other two in the implementation of that purpose. Their purpose is the healing of humanity and the creation, a creation in which all three Persons were instrumental. The healing of humanity involves, the church saw, the taking up of men and women into the life of the Trinity. It was from these reflections that the phrase “one God in three Persons” was formulated by the church at a particular time and place. I say at a particular time and place because at another time and place the way the community of Christ articulated its experience may have been different. But even if it was different it would still have had to give expression to the activity of the three characters in the drama of God’s involvement with humanity.

As the Christ community reflected on the personal behaviour of the three Divine Persons it saw that the relational communion of the Trinity was something it should try to imitate in its life. This relational communion is expression by a self-forgetful involvement in the suffering of the world. The Persons of the Trinity bridged the gap between suffering and hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christ communion that is the Christian community seeks to emulate the Trinity by bridging the gap between suffering and hope. It promotes peace and justice and, by its willingness to stand by the broken and the oppressed, nurtures new life where it is able.

I have tried to show that the Trinity is not some devilishly complex doctrine thought up by the participants at a church conference in 321 CE in order to confuse the good people who have occupied the pews in all ages. I have tried to show that the Trinitarian understanding of God arises from the divine characters by whom the Christ community was, and is still, encountered. As we proceed through the church’s year I will try to make reflection on the Trinity a mundane part of my preaching rather than treating the Trinity as something spoken about once a year on the unfortunately designated ‘Trinity Sunday’.

