

Trinity Sunday, 7 June 2020 (Year A)

I'm feeling excited this morning because I get to talk to you about the Trinity. That's not sarcasm, by the way: I really am excited. It's a topic that is close to my heart and central to my faith, although this wasn't always the case.

Growing up in a Christian home, I developed a strong sense of God as a loving, merciful Father. I was encouraged to think of Jesus as my friend and saviour, and was taught to pray for the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So all the elements were there, but I struggled to put them together. Later, occasionally, maybe during a Trinity Sunday sermon such as this, I would try to make sense of laboured explanations involving shamrocks or triangles, or water turning into ice or steam.

Perhaps the most memorable of these analogies, though, was presented by a teacher at my school who, one morning at assembly, took on the daunting task of explaining the doctrine of the Trinity to a thousand jaded adolescent girls. Wheeling a large, newfangled IBM computer onto the stage—this was the mid-eighties—he likened the Triune God to a PC: I think the hard drive was God the Father; the screen was God the Son, and the keyboard was God the Spirit. While entertaining and well-intentioned, it still left me feeling that, as Christian doctrines go, the Trinity wasn't a particularly appealing one—it was still just a conundrum that I somehow had to get my head around, a kind of impossible maths problem to be solved.

The problem with applying analogies to a mystery like the Trinity is that at best they'll be inadequate and at worst they'll lead us into heresy: the heresy of modalism in the case of the water analogy, or Arianism in the case of the computer. (You could google these terms later if you want to delve a little deeper into some church history.) That school assembly engaged me for a moment, but it didn't change my life. And as I've since learned, *the Trinity should change the way we see everything*. The theologian Leonardo Boff goes so far as to say that this mystery 'should be the deepest source, closest inspiration and brightest illumination of the meaning of life that we can imagine'. That's a big claim!

So how can this be? How can something so hard to get our heads around be our 'brightest illumination'? The problem lies, I think, in that phrase 'getting our head around', as though the very being of the eternal God, the source of all life, is something that we could ever fully encompass with our limited, human minds.

And that's actually, I think, the beauty of the Trinity. The *mystery* of it produces in us the very attitude we need in order to make sense of it, participate in it and be transformed by it. It shows us our limitations and makes us humble. As the Anglican theologian Alistair McGrath puts it, 'It represents a chastened admission that we are unable to master God'.

So instead of seeing the Trinity as something we need get our minds around, maybe we should look at as a reality that *encompasses us*. Rather than approaching it only as an intellectual concept to be grasped, it might be more helpful to come to the Trinity in a spirit of prayerful contemplation, humbly asking that we might embrace this mystery in the same way the persons of the Trinity embrace each other—in self-emptying, self-giving love. My experience has been that the less I struggle to 'master' the Trinity as a concept, and the more I give myself to the *reality* of it, the more I receive from it. When approached this way, the Trinity has become for me not an obstacle to be overcome in the life of faith, but a kind of key that has opened doors of understanding and insight, and led me deeper into relationship with God.

In our gospel this morning, we heard what is, perhaps, one of the clearer articulations of the Trinity in the Bible. And it's no accident that it occurs in the context of the Great Commission, where Jesus sends us, his followers, out into the world to spread the word of God's love and to make disciples. It's especially significant that we are instructed to *baptize* new disciples in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is our doorway to the church, and the Trinity is, as it were, the key that turns the lock.

While the word *Trinity* doesn't explicitly appear anywhere in Scripture, it is implicit in the entire biblical narrative, which proclaims to us not only that God loves us, but that God *is* love. It's a beautiful idea, and a familiar one to most of us, but we risk turning it into a platitude if we divorce it from the Trinity. The idea that God is love only becomes meaningful and coherent when we understand that God is—in God's very being and throughout eternity—a loving communion of three persons. *Relationship* is essential to who God is. And not just any kind of relationship. The relations between Father, Son and Spirit are never coercive or controlling; there is no merging or confusing of each person's identity—each remains particular and distinct—but they delight in each other and there is such complete unity that they are, in the most meaningful sense, one being.

So what does this mean for us and for the church? First of all, the Trinity is not simply a *model* for the church—a blueprint to follow—but rather a relationship or communion in which we are called to *participate*. We don't just observe and then replicate the triune life of God within the church and the world; we are actually invited to enter into that life—to be drawn into the circle of love that flows eternally among the divine persons and then to glorify God by reflecting that love within the world. If we simply attempt to 'apply' principles gleaned from our understanding of the Trinity to our lives, to the church and to the world around us, then our spirituality, the church and Christian mission remain *our* project, and our image of the Trinity becomes something like a glossy photograph in a cookbook: 'this is what it should look like when you are finished'. But of course, no matter how carefully we follow the recipe, it never ends up looking like the picture.

In the Eastern Church, they speak of the Trinity as a kind of beautiful, elaborate dance of continual giving and receiving. The love that flows among the divine persons is so abundant and so powerful that it cannot be contained within the Trinity but generously, gratuitously spills out into the world in acts of life-giving creativity and divine self-sacrifice (seen most significantly, of course, in God's creation of the world and in Christ's saving death on the cross). The Trinity is what makes grace possible. It generously draws us, and the whole of creation, into the dance. We are incapable of shaping ourselves or the church, let alone the world, in the image of the Trinity. Ultimately it is the Triune God who is doing the shaping, but through the Spirit, we are called and enabled to participate. I don't know about you, but I find this an incredibly exciting and encouraging thought.

So as our hearts break at the violence, disintegration and polarisation we observe in our world at the moment, I encourage you to think about what it *really* means to worship and love a God who is one in three, and three in one. And in the coming weeks and months, as we begin to emerge from isolation, perhaps with a renewed appreciation of the importance of relationship and community, and as we begin to reconnect with those from whom we've been separated, let us pray that our lives, our church and our world might be increasingly drawn into the dance: into the life-giving, self-giving, unifying love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.