

2019-06-16 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price

Trinity Sunday

Exodus 3: 1 – 15; John 3: 1 - 17

Archbishop Thomas Becket, later murdered in Canterbury Cathedral, was consecrated bishop on Trinity Sunday 1162, and he ordered that this Sunday should be especially commemorated in England for ever. It's the Sunday after which about half the Sundays in the year are numbered. And clearly it is about the nature of God, one in three and three in one, the Trinity.

But to most people the doctrine of the Trinity is extremely obscure, almost unintelligible. Many clergy seek to avoid preaching about the Trinity, and perhaps they are wise to do so, but I shall have a go, with fingers crossed. There was a famous Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston in the United States, Cardinal Cushing, who told the story of how when he was a parish priest he was called to the side of a man who had collapsed in the street. The priest asked the man: 'Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit'? The man opened his eyes and said to some bystanders: 'Here I am dying and he's asking me riddles'!

Is the doctrine of the Trinity more than a riddle? Is it an essential part of our faith? One obvious point to make is that there is no specific reference to the Trinity as such in either of the two great Creeds, the Apostles' Creed, which we said this evening, or the Nicene Creed, which we say at Holy Communion. In both we declare our faith in God the Father, in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, but there is no actual reference to the Trinity. And it's also relevant that the word Trinity itself does not occur in the New Testament.

Yet, on the other hand, the worship in our Prayer Books is full of references to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (Modern forms of worship used Holy Spirit, but this evening's service is from the 1662 Prayer Book and uses Holy Ghost, which is the name I shall use in this sermon.) Each psalm and most canticles end with ascribing glory to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Our prayers finish with the Grace. Our services end with the blessing of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I use the phrase to begin and end my sermons. Many of our hymns have a Trinitarian form or end with an act of praise addressed to the Trinity. Above all new Christians are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. This would seem to suggest that the Trinity is central to the Christian faith.

But in the 1662 Prayer Book there is also to be found a statement of faith called Quicunque Vult or the Creed of St Athanasius. In the Prayer Book it comes immediately after Evening Prayer and it is to be said 'At Morning Prayer' on certain days, including today. The first half describes the Trinity, and states that 'the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity'. There's an awful lot more about the Trinity, and the Creed includes the terrifying words that anyone who does not believe what is in this Creed, including the definitions of the Trinity, 'shall perish everlastingly'. This might be an occasion when ignorance is bliss. And I have never heard this Creed said in any church.

This teaching about the Trinity is essentially about the relationship between God the Father, his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. At its heart is the issue of in what sense we can speak of one God? How would we reply, for example, to Muslims, who often accuse Christians of worshipping three gods? These are deep waters. We are seeking to understand the nature of God with our little human minds.

Our fundamental document for our Faith is the New Testament. This does not include a systematic exposition of the Trinity, but it does provide the basis for the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus always called God his Father, and at the very beginning of St Mark's Gospel we read of Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan when a voice from heaven referred to Jesus as '**my beloved Son**' and the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. There is the Trinity. And St Paul wrote of Jesus as one who was '**in the form of God**'. In St John's Gospel Jesus declared that he and the Father were one. In St John's Gospel we also learn that, when Jesus returned to his Father, the Holy Spirit would take his place as our Advocate and Comforter.

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St Paul also wrote these familiar words in the second letter to the Corinthians: ‘**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all**’, and in St Matthew’s Gospel Jesus told his disciples to baptize ‘**in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost**’. So there are references in the New Testament to the Trinity, but it did take three centuries before the Church arrived at a formal definition of the Trinity, that the Blessed Trinity is to be thought of as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who are one God. ‘Persons’ is a misleading word, because in Latin and English person means an individual. So when a tourist on an open-top coach tour of Oxford asked the guide what were the four statues on Trinity College, the guide replied: ‘Three persons and one God’. It might be better to speak of three distinct modes of existence in the Trinity, but one God.

Is the doctrine of the Trinity actually necessary? Or is it an unnecessary complication of a simple faith? What matters above all is that the doctrine of the Trinity provides the best explanation of who Jesus is. In the New Testament Jesus is seen as much more than an inspired teacher. He reveals God by his life, teaching, death on the Cross, and his resurrection on the third day. He comes to be acknowledged as divine, as God. And the Holy Ghost came to be seen as a distinct personal agent bringing the activity of Father and Son to the lives of men and women. God’s disclosure of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost profoundly corresponds to the innermost nature of God as he really exists in himself from all eternity.

And the Trinity is there in our worship. We meet together to worship the Father through the Son in the Holy Ghost. In spatial terms, we lift up our hearts and minds to God the Father who is **above** us, through Jesus Christ our brother and friend who is **beside** us, because the Holy Ghost is **within** us.

Our readings tonight seem to me to have been chosen to indicate how human understanding of God’s nature has developed as God has revealed more about himself. In the first lesson, Moses at the burning bush [**Exodus, chapter 3, verses 1-15**], the stress is on a monotheistic God. God is one, known by the name ‘**I am**’. He is the God of the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the second lesson [St John, chapter 3, verses 1-17] there are definite hints of the three modes of the one God. In the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus there are references to God the Father, to his Son, Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit. We move from what we might call pure deity, the mysterious God of Moses at the burning bush to the triune God, who once in Jesus lived on this earth and who in the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts.

The whole of the Christian life is summed up in relation to the Holy Trinity. The love of the Father draws us to him through the love of the Son and within the love of the Holy Spirit. Our response should be that of loving faith in this God, faith expressed in worship and prayer and issuing in out-going love towards our fellow human beings.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a great comfort, although still a mystery. Perhaps we need to heed the words of the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts: ‘Where reason fails with all her powers, there faith prevails, and love adores’. In love we adore the Most Holy, Indivisible, and Blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, on this day and for ever.