

The strong name of the Trinity

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor
Trinity Sunday—11 June 2017
Reverend Martin Johnson

Exodus 34.1-8, Song of the Three Young Men, 2 Corinthians 13.11-13, Matthew 28.16-20

Trinity Sunday is a day when traditionally one gets a visiting preacher; let someone else wrestle with the idea of the one and the three! Probably, at the end of this sermon, you'll wish I had! Anyway... today, above all days, we celebrate God! It's as simple as that! We do that every Sunday, of course, but today has been set aside to remind us of the very nature of the God whom we worship and it presents us with a number of questions. Can we ever really know the nature of God? John Wesley apparently said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God." If this is true, are we not just wasting our time talking in riddles and ideas that don't really make sense? And ultimately: "does it really matter?"

If you are asked about God, I wonder what your first response is. For many the answer is a rather woolly one and it probably finds its roots in Sunday school or ideas that have made their way into our thinking via the Greeks or the Romans—they're very influential.

Our first thinking should always be that God is a Trinity—God is this relationship, this movement, this constant, this perpetual outpouring of creation, of redemption and of sanctification: a movement revealed through the creation, its beauty and order, in the life of Jesus who shows us what it is to live a fully human life, and in the Spirit who animates all things.

Amen.

(Here, to laughter, Revd Martin made as if to leave the pulpit.)

But we can't stop there, can we?

The problem is that for many years, centuries in fact, the talk of the Trinity was purely speculative. Folk tried to understand the inner nature of God and we ended up with lots of equations like 1+1+1:1 and statements that came out of Greek philosophy. Good luck with that: most of us have enough trouble trying to understand our own inner nature, and the inner life of those around us, let alone the divine. So let's leave the philosophy to one side.

If a young child asks you. "What's that?"—Let's say, they are pointing to a rake, something that's getting a bit of a work out at present. You wouldn't just say "It's a rake," and leave it at that, would you? You would describe its function; you would say, "It's for raking up leaves." Now I am not suggesting that God is simply the answer to a problem or can be understood by asking, "What is God for?" But let's use that idea as we consider the Trinity; it is a starting point; as one of my favourite writers on the Trinity puts it: the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life. I would be so bold as to suggest radical consequences for all life.

Ethicists will tell you that the greatest ethical dilemma is represented by the issue of "the one and the many." It is an issue that we can see played out around us all the time. I found it was a question that I had to deal with in the military.

What place does an individual have in an army? Or for that matter in a tribe, or in a family. We might ask, what place a refugee has in this country, or for that matter an indigenous person. And what about the dissenter in a political party or a church or a university faculty? How are these people dealt with? I think we can see tyranny in both the majority and the minority

viewpoints around a number of different issues in today's society and politics. Simple solutions are not good enough. It is not enough to sacrifice individuality and diversity for the sake of the unity, or to sacrifice unity for the sake of individuality and difference. Our current political problems in the West seem to stem from this issue and invariably we seek simplistic solutions in populist politics that do nothing to deal with the issues of our diverse communities. Democracy remains central to our society, yes it does, however it is a fragile idea easily manipulated and we know that, just because you're in the minority doesn't mean to say you are wrong! In the words of the great hymn: "binding ourselves to the strong name of the Trinity, invoking the same," is a crucial balance to democracy. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our understanding of God as Trinity has profound implications for society—indeed for everything. In the Trinity, all things are held in balance.

If we *believe* in God as creator in whose image we are created. And if we believe that that same God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ who brought us a new and startling way of knowing that God, the God that he called *Abba*. And if we believe in the God as the Holy Spirit, the giver of life the means by which we share that God (Remember Paul: God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father"). Then, we will always seek ways in which society and community can flourish and thrive in all its diverse ways.

The new series of Fr Brown kicked off last night. It reminded me of his creator, the writer GK Chesterton. He described those searching for God as like some people who set out in a boat looking for exotic lands. After weeks at sea they finally arrive and plant their flag on the beach, looking up at an exotic temple, only to realise that it's the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. It's easy sometimes to think that deep theological issues have no bearing on everyday life, but the doctrine of the Trinity calls us to reflect on our own lives—something we can never do in isolation from those around us and the community that sustains us and in which we find meaning. Doing this we are caught up in a movement this love that binds us together.

"I bind unto myself today,
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three."

Amen.