

**Sermon for Trinity Sunday 7th June 2020**

Around the country this morning there are clergy who have cleverly arranged to take today as a day’s holiday and are smirking with glee that they don’t have to preach on The Trinity! How does one even begin to explain the relationship between God as Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – three persons, one substance?

If you haven’t seen it yet, do pay You Tube a visit and watch ‘St Patrick’s Bad Analogies’, a tongue in cheek deconstruction of some of the most popular analogies for trying to explain this most problematic of doctrines. The link is in this week’s newsletter. I’m not going to even begin to explain heresies such as Modalism, Arianism or Partialism; it might interest a few but many I suspect will creep away to make lunch instead.

There is a story about Augustine – who wrote a massive tome trying to explain the Trinity - that goes something like this. One day he is walking along the sea shore and comes across a little lad patiently carrying water from the ocean and repeatedly pouring it into a small hole in the sand. “What are you doing?”, asks Augustine. “I am emptying the sea”, replies the lad. “But it’s impossible to fit the whole ocean into such a small hole”, says Augustine. “If this is impossible”, says the lad, “why are you trying to describe the nature of God in a mere book”.

I have approximately 800 words left in which to convince you that the doctrine of the Trinity makes some kind of sense. At the risk of committing heresy, let me begin with my favourite biscuit – or is it a cake. The Jaffa Cake.

The Jaffa cake has three layers – chocolate, jam and biscuit. Take away the chocolate and it is merely a jam tart. Take away the jam and it is merely a chocolate digestive. Take away the biscuit and you’ve just got a horrible mess.

So there you go – nothing more need be said. Father, Son and Holy Spirit – God is only God with all three. God is a Jaffa Cake.

Now that is a heresy of course because it implies you can separate the three when you can’t, which just proves my point that this endeavour of trying to preach on the Trinity is fundamentally flawed.

Usually at desperate moments like this, preachers turn to the Bible to rescue them. But we will find that scripture offers us only a partial rescue from this theological quagmire.

Our two readings this morning are the two passages in the new testament that get closest to describing the Trinity. Neither is a statement of Trinitarian doctrine but both – in referring to all three divine dimensions in one breath – get us pretty close. If you read Paul carefully, he makes no observations at all about the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit but in mentioning all three at once is suggestive of the doctrine that began to evolve a couple of hundred years later.

Our gospel reading from Matthew – which was written after Paul’s letters of course – contains the baptismal trinitarian formula that we are all very familiar with. But the section that describes Jesus makes no mention of the Spirit at all, only that Jesus is acting on God’s authority.

This lack of certainty about the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit has echoes in the Hebrew scriptures where God the creator, God personified as Wisdom (always female by the way) and the Spirit of God are all present.

So where can we go from here. Is there a succinct, watertight way to describe God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

You may come across analogies that make sufficient sense to you to satisfy your curiosity – a little like my jaffa cake. But for me the value of the doctrine of the Trinity lies in its mystery, not clarity.

The Trinity speaks to me of a God that is universal but also unfathomable; intimate but also incomprehensible; the creator of creativity itself, but also dependent upon us for revealing the ongoing creativity of God in the world.

At this point we touch upon one of the most exciting and challenging aspects of the Trinity. For although it is primarily a doctrine that attempts to describe the relationship between the different dimensions of God, it cannot do this persuasively without also implying something about the relationship between God and humanity.

There are times when human behaviour suggests that humanity sits outside of creation. That is nonsense of course, humanity is as much a part of creation as any other form of life on earth. A humble reminder here that if humanity eradicates itself, creation will continue…

As humanity is part of creation, then humanity is also part of God in the sense that God imbues the whole of creation with His Spirit. This is confirmed by Jesus’ identity as being both wholly God and wholly man. Jesus was in every respect both an ordinary man and an extra-ordinary God. The difference between Jesus and us lying in his perfection not in his lack of humanity.

If you’re still following this line of reasoning, then the most startling conclusion about the doctrine of the Trinity is that it points us towards an understanding of God that is internal as well as external to ourselves. God is to be found in our hearts and minds as well as externally in the world and indeed beyond it. And it is this realisation, that encouraged the early Fathers of the Church to describe the Christian journey of faith as a journey towards the divinisation of ourselves, the discovery, the revelation, of God in us as well as God with us.

If all this makes your eyes water, don’t worry. Trying to make rational sense of the Trinity consumes far more energy than it is probably wise to expend on it. Stick instead with dwelling in the mystery of God.

To do so is not a cop out at all. Quite the reverse. For to simply accept the mystery of God without becoming entangled in hundreds of years of theological debate is to accept that it is sometimes wiser, and healthier, to trust than to question. And a living, engaged and active faith, rather than a dry, academic, intellectual one, requires trust in God more than any other attribute.

If we can learn to trust God, we can learn to be vulnerable in the presence of Jesus, and once we’ve done that, we can be open to the power of the Spirit of God in our lives and in the world.

Perhaps this is the most important teaching of the Trinity.

Amen.