

**Trinity Sunday 2015 (31.05.15)**

**Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; John 3: 1 – 17**

My aged parents came to visit recently. And the trouble with well-intentioned grandparents is that they will bring things with them. My mother has a bag made out of carpet and, between each visit, she puts into it things that she thinks might interest us. And when they come, out comes this carpet bag and she produces magazine articles and books and we collectively hold our breath when she brings out something from the bric-a-brac stall at a coffee morning with the words “I thought this might interest the children,” overlooking the fact that they’re no longer four years old. Last time they came, inside the carpet bag, there was this executive toy. It’s a picture frame that swivels; and inside it there is sand suspended in a sort of thick liquid. And each time you swivel the frame, the sand settles through the liquid and forms a new pattern.

Well, I just thought I’d show you that because it puts off the moment when I have to try to say something coherent about the Holy Trinity. Trinity Sunday is the *bête noir* of preachers when they have to try to make some sort of sense out of the proposition that Christians believe in one God who has three persons, each distinct, but indivisibly one: one in three and three in one.

I remember once seeing a chart – I’ve been trying to find it again on the internet, but I haven’t found it – and on this chart there was a column of all the analogies used by preachers to explain the Holy Trinity. If you’ve been coming to church for years, you’ll have heard them all. And you read them, in this column, and you think “ooh, yes: that’s a good way to think of the Trinity.” Only, in the column next to it, it lists which classic heresy the analogy or explanation, is, in fact, an example of. So you think “That’s good,” but actually what it says is an example of Subordinationism, or Monarchianism, or Sabellianism

(which might also be known as Modalism) or it might be an example of Eunominism, or Eusebianism or Macedonianism (which, obviously, could also be described as an example of Pneumatomachi!) I'm not making this up: it's every preacher's nightmare.

And all the problems flow from one simple error: they are all attempts to put the cart before the horse. They all say "Here is a proposition: God is one in three and three in one. Now let me explain it." No one in their right mind would ever propose that God is one in three and three in one. If I handed out blank sheets of paper to everyone here; if I handed out blank sheets of paper to a gathering of the most brilliant theological minds in the world; and said "Design God," no one would hand in the Holy Trinity on it. And that's because the Holy Trinity isn't a starting point, it's never been designed: it's where we end up.

The point is that the Bible does not systematically present God. I said that in last week's sermon, and I'm

saying it again now. The Bible is not systematic. It is a collection, a haphazard collection, of people's attempts to capture in words, with all the limitations of the vocabulary of mere human language, dynamic encounters with the living God – God who is beyond all human understanding, more than words can say or thoughts can think.

So what happens is: someone has a powerful experience of God and tries to capture it in words. Then, perhaps decades, perhaps centuries later, someone else has a powerful experience of God and tries to capture that in words. And then someone else does the same, and so it goes on. Then centuries later someone comes along with a brain the size of a double decker bus; someone who likes things to be systematic; someone who can see patterns emerging; and someone who is able to organise those patterns into systematic thoughts; and that person looks at all these accounts of people's experiences of the living God; and they see emerging out of those accounts something which their

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minds can organise into doctrines. And one of those doctrines is the Holy Trinity: God is one in three and three in one.

But that is the end product of a long, hard, backwards look at accounts of people's actual experiences of the living God. It's not a proposition, a starting point which we take and against which we then try to measure up God.

It's a bit like the sand picture in this executive toy, which is why I've brought it along, actually, and used it as an excuse to be rude about my mother. The pattern which we see – which is quite an attractive pattern, actually – is what emerges from the way the sand happens to fall through the liquid inside the frame. Nobody's designed it. Nobody's planned to create a pattern by putting a grain of sand here and a grain of sand there or piling up a heap of grains at this side and another one over there, or whatever. It's just the end product of what happens to have happened.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the end product of what happens to have happened when scholars have analysed all these attempts to put into words what it's like to encounter God. And I can't explain it, and none of us can understand it, because it's not a proposition to be understood. It's an invitation for each one of us to have for ourselves the sort of encounter with God that these people have tried to capture with the poor resources of human language and which then have been formulated into a doctrine.

When we encounter God we are getting involved in something which we can't explain; something to which we can only respond by entering into worship, by being caught up in things bigger than and beyond ourselves, something, as in the vision of Isaiah, like being with the seraphim in heaven crying out "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts! Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Glory be to God on high!"

Amen.