

Trinity Sunday 2017

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8; John 16: 5 -15

So, it's Trinity Sunday – the preacher's *bête noir*! It's the Sunday on which the preacher has to say something that's not only coherent and helpful about the doctrine of the Trinity, but also manages not to fall into the trap of some classic heresy. I once saw on the internet – and every year I try and fail to re-find it – a chart with a column of sermon illustrations about the Trinity and another column which put alongside each one which classic heresy it commits.

Jean mentioned a couple in this morning's sermon. She wasn't being heretical; she expressly said they each failed fully to do justice to God. First there was the egg: it's one egg, but it's also shell, egg white and yolk. Doesn't work, does it! If you've only got one of those components, you haven't got an egg: you've got a bit of an egg. You can't say that an egg shell is an egg; or that egg white is an egg; or that a yoke is an

egg. But the Father isn't just a bit of God: the Father is God; and the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. If you've seen the Son, you've seen the Father; but if you've just seen the egg shell, you ain't seen the yoke!

Then there's water: it can exist as gas, liquid or solid but is always H₂O – but it can't do it all at the same time! God doesn't get up in the morning and think "I know: today I'll be the Father. Up, no, I've changed my mind: I'll be Holy Spirit instead." Just as every bit of God is Father and is Son and is Holy Spirit, so every bit of God is *always* Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, whichever illustration you chose, it breaks down. But that's not to say it isn't helpful. Actually, I'm not too worried about being a bit heretical, if it helps communicate God.

Let's face it: it is a minefield. And scripture doesn't help us much. In fact, this evening's New Testament lesson from John's Gospel is the minefield over which

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the western and eastern churches blew themselves apart. They each used differing interpretations of this passage to come to conflicting conclusions about how the Holy Trinity works! And the result is that they fell out about where the word 'And' should come in the Nicene Creed and have remained unreconciled ever since. The eastern church thinks the Son proceeds from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son; and the western church thinks the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, together; and yet maintains there is no inequality in the Trinity!

I remember at Theological College we were discussing the problem of eradicating the idea of hierarchy from the Trinity and a strident feminist suggested it could all be sorted if we'd only stop using masculine vocabulary about the Trinity. I merely pointed out that she'd not met my mother; and it seemed to defeat the argument!

OK, so it is a minefield; and if the Holy Trinity is a proposition for how better to understand God, it doesn't seem that it's a very successful one. But the point is that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not a proposition. Nobody has ever sat down with a blank piece of paper and proposed that there should be one God; and that that one God should be three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's not how Christian doctrine is created. Christian doctrine is written backwards: written backwards from experience.

And people's experience of God is unsystematic, serendipity, uncoordinated, chaotic even. But people write down these unsystematic, serendipity, uncoordinated, chaotic experiences and revere them as scripture. And then it's the job of theologians, be it patristic theologians of the early centuries or systematic theologians of the last couple of centuries, to try to recognise and then articulate something coherent in it. And they say that the words which best seem to fit messiness of life with God, as it is

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experienced, is to say that what we seem to have here is one God who seems to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit – sorry, that’s as good as it gets: run with it and see how far it gets you.

And what they create is not a proposition about what God should be like; but an invitation to share the experience they’re trying to describe of what God actually is like. God is here, present, in the midst of us, with his sleeves rolled up, up to his elbows in the mess that we’re in. And God is also pointing us and taking us to something beyond us, better than us, bigger than us.

Which is precisely what we need to hear. My word we are in a mess! But we needn’t be defined by that mess. We’ve read this evening about the call of Isaiah. He knew himself to be a man of unclean lips who lived among people of unclean lips. Yet he had seen the glory of God. And God had only to muse on whom he

should send when Isaiah jumped straight in and said “Here I am: send me!”

The Spirit equips us and empowers us to allow ourselves to be sent; sent with the same manifesto as Isaiah: good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed – the year of the Lords’ favour. Without a God who could be described as a Holy Trinity, that wouldn’t be the case. Don’t worry about understanding it: just get out there and live it!

Amen.