

## Trinity Sunday, 2019

### ***Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15***

You might remember that at the beginning of Lent, I read you the words of the Communion service from the BCP, with its wonderful words of cursing, fire and brimstone. Today I have another little known liturgical treasure for you – the Athanasian Creed. Named after the great fourth century bishop Athanasius, it probably dates from the fifth century. It has long fallen out of popular usage, but is regarded by all the mainstream churches as a classic statement of the faith, and as especially apt for this particular day, Trinity Sunday, as its main concern is to state the Trinitarian faith of the Church. Indeed, the Book of Common Prayer used to require it to be said this day. So I should really make you stand and recite it, but if you're sitting comfortably, I'll give you some of the edited highlights:

*'The Catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance ... The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal, and yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal; As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated: but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible .. for like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord, so are we forbidden by the Catholic religion to say there be three Gods, or three Lords.... '*

And so on, for a grand total of twenty eight careful statements about exactly what is three, and exactly what is one. And my goodness, you'd better understand it and get it right, because as it says in the very opening lines: 'whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick faith; which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.'

So, have you kept it whole and undefiled? Are you quite sure you have the doctrine of the Trinity nailed down, understood, ticked off? Could you breeze through the Athanasian Creed as if were a statement of the blindingly self-evident? Or might you be on the road to perishing everlastingly?

Most of us, preachers included, get rather anxious around talk of the Trinity. It can seem hugely complicated, mystifying, and not – after all that intellectual effort – not terribly *relevant* to Christian life. What has all this (*wave Prayer Book and creed*) to do with following Jesus?

That's a very tempting question to ask. However it's not actually that difficult to answer. There *is* a connection between all this talk of Trinity and following Jesus, a very big connection – and here's one way of seeing it.

The first thing to think of is of God. God the utterly awesome one, God the reality from whom all other reality springs, God whose grandeur and power and glory simply overwhelms our imagination. Think for instance of that famous scene from the prophet Isaiah, where he suddenly sees God in the Temple, and hears all the angels crying out 'Holy, Holy, Holy' and all he can do is fall to the ground, and say that having seen this he is broken, for he is a man of unclean lips. Nothing he could think or say could really express the reality of God: the utterly Awesome One: the tremendous, the beyond.

And then think of God made flesh. The Awesome One, the Unspeakable One, speaks Himself – makes Himself understandable, deal-able with, *human*. This is Jesus. He is what you get when the immensity of God translates itself into human. As Jesus puts it in the reading today from John's Gospel: all that the Father has is mine. All that the Father has is mine: all the depth, all the richness, all the glory – look into Jesus, and it's there, without diminution or dilution. He is of one being with the Father. If you want to know God, look at Jesus.

And interestingly, what you'll find is not just someone who is perfect love, perfect goodness, someone who shows us what the life of God looks like in human terms. There's something more mysterious than that. Because if there's one thing that stands out about the character of Jesus in the Gospels, it's that his whole life is poured towards the one He calls his Father. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbour as yourself was his great commandment, and there's no doubt that He did it himself. Loved his neighbour, of course, but also loved his God. It's on almost every page of the Gospels.

But if He is one with God, how can he love God? You have to be different from someone to love them. The more Christians pondered that, the more they realised Jesus had shown them something truly astounding. He was one with God, but also different from God, different enough to love and be loved. One, but different. Which meant – and here's the astonishing bit – that there had to be some kind of difference *within* God. There had, at the least, to be a kind of two-ness in God, a relationship of love between the Father and the Son.

And the third thing to think of is Pentecost, which we celebrated last week. And what happened then? Well, there are many ways to describe it, but why not use words from today's Gospel reading: when the Spirit of truth comes, says Jesus, he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. The Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Now to declare it doesn't just mean to tell us about it. It means to proclaim it, to make it real, to make it effective within us. In other words, what Pentecost means is that somehow, Jesus' one-ness with his Father – all that the Father has is mine – gets reproduced in the disciples' lives. It's as if - well, it just *is* – that they're drawn into the love between the Son and his Father. Everything about Jesus begins to become true of us – his goodness, his joy, his courage, his wisdom, all of it rooted in his oneness with the Father – all of it begins to happen within us. He will take what is mine and declare it to you. The Spirit is like the breath of Jesus, breathing unity with God into us at our very depths and changing us from the bottom up.

And again, the Spirit is *different* from Jesus and his Father, but it's a difference that doesn't involve any kind of distance or dilution: it really is *God* that is being breathed into us. And over time, that made Christians realise that there is not just a two-ness in God, but a three-ness: that the one reality we name God lives in three different ways:

- First there is God, unutterable mystery, awesome power, the wholly beyond us.
- Second there is God made flesh in Jesus, the unspeakable one translated into a human life.
- Thirdly, there is God breathing deep within us, drawing us into that life, weaving our life together with it.

One God, living in three ways, three actions. Each of them *really* God, the true, undiluted reality. As the angels sang, 'Holy, Holy, Holy.' And we join with them, praising God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- So Trinity is not a hopeless academic puzzle: it's really just trying to spell out who the God is that we have come to know and share in.

**Peter Waddell**