

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Trinity Sunday – 30th May 2021

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The opening words of this morning's Gospel: *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God.'* Subtext: But what are you up to? Who are you? What's your game? Today the Church calls us to celebrate the Holy Trinity. Nicodemus was clearly puzzled about Jesus, but we may well be equally unsure when we try to understand the Holy Trinity.

In one of my parishes I had a very faithful and devout Churchwarden, Peter. Every year he'd tell me he found it difficult to come to Church on Trinity Sunday. '*I just can't get my head around it*', he'd say. Then and now I still very much sympathise with him. But in our conversations, he'd share with me how he viewed his manual work at Tube Investments, in Chesterfield. For him, he was taking part in God's creative activity. Then, his devotion to Our Lord was seen in weekly attendance at the Eucharist. If he was on a Sunday shift, he'd receive communion after Evensong. And he knew about and exemplified the Holy Spirit in his life as seen in the way he lived the fruits of the Spirit in his family, his work, and his commitment to the local church and the surrounding community. **There** was, and still is, I'm sure, the reality

of the Holy Trinity in the life of one very ordinary, and yet extraordinarily impressive person.

The word Trinity occurs nowhere in the Bible but expressions of the Trinity run right through Scripture. Biblical scholars see allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament. In the creation narrative in Genesis 1.26 we read: *Then God said, Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness.* When Abraham met God at the oaks of Mamre, *He looked up and saw **three men** standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground* (Genesis 18. 1&2). Then in today's Old Testament reading we have the beatific vision of Isaiah with those wonderful words, '*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*' Isaiah 6.3 - thus our opening hymn this morning.

In the New Testament we find two very clear Trinitarian formulas, the first, interestingly at the conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*** (Matthew 28.19) Also at the end of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, we read: *The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit** be with you all* (2 Corinthians 13.13).

And, of course, the four gospels are full of the actions of, and allusions to the persons of the Holy Trinity. Jesus makes innumerable references to his Father and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. The activity of the Holy Trinity permeates the entire New Testament and, if we prayerfully reflect in our reading of scripture, we

can equally see this in the Old Testament. The Old can only be fully understood in the light of the New. It anticipates the fulfilment of its promises.

In the New Testament we see the Father Creator God, the earthly Divine Jesus who brings salvation and the life-giving Holy Spirit, so where in the Old Testament can we see the Trinity at work? We see God the Father especially in Genesis wherever there is creation. We see our Redeemer at work wherever there is salvation, rescue, redemption and reconciliation. And the presence of the Spirit (wind or breath - the Hebrew word *ruach* covers all three words) runs throughout, moving on the waters at the creation and breathing life into the dry bones in Ezekiel. With eyes of prayer we see the Triune God engaged in creation, salvation and the life of the spirit.

The word 'Trinity' first occurred in Greek, the written language of the New Testament and the Post Apostolic Church. We read about *Trias* in the later part of the second century in the writings of St Theophilus of Antioch. The first occurrence in Latin was in the writings of Tertullian in the early part of the second century. It was St Augustine, in the early part of the fifth century who wrote his great tome *De Trinitate*. But the tale is told that as he was writing it, one day he met a young boy by the sea shore who was bringing water from the sea and pouring it into a hole in the sand. When Augustine asked what was he doing the boy replied, 'Emptying the sea into this hole.' Augustine asked the boy how he could empty such a large ocean into a small hole. The boy (who was an angel in disguise) said, 'How can you understand the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with your finite human mind?' If we try to understand, rationalise or comprehend the Trinity then we'll be leading ourselves into a delusion. We shall only know the full reality of the Trinity when we

are finally united with our triune God, beyond our life in this present physical existence.

When I think about it, I had an introduction to the Trinity at quite an early age. In the days when the Book of Common Prayer was the only form of worship, I was around ten or eleven years old. When our village Rector was away on holiday, a Lay Reader would lead Morning Prayer in place of the 10.30 Sung Eucharist and if it was a certain saint's day, the Apostles' Creed could be replaced with the **Quicumque Vult**. The what! It was also known as the Athanasian Creed, though was written three or four centuries after Saint Athanasius. On one such Sunday I was walking home with a friend, John, who kept quoting lines like, *But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal. . . .So the Father is God, the Son is God : and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.* John told me he had learnt these lines instead of listening to the sermon.

Probably a couple or more decades later, after I was ordained, I was invited back to preach in my boyhood village of Narborough in Leicestershire. And there in All Saints Church was John in the congregation with his teenage girl friend, now his wife. I didn't ask him if he could still quote lines from the *Quicumque Vult*. But it's worth a read as a prayerful reflection on the mystery of Holy Trinity. If you have an old Prayer Book, it comes just after Morning and Evening Prayer, and before The

Litany. The text is also online at *The Creed of S. Athanasius / The Church of England* and an nine minute sung version is available.

But perhaps we might be wiser to look for simpler explanations of the Trinity. When Saint Patrick was challenged that it was contrary to reason that God could be One and Three, he pointed to the threefold leaf of the shamrock, explaining that it was both three in one sense and one in another.

What is important for us is not how we try to comprehend or even start to understand the full nature of the Holy Trinity. Instead we should be seeking to live the life of the Trinity. Living the Trinity is in creating, in our own lives and the lives of others, what is good and enhancing, caring for and preserving this planet that God has given us for our earthly transient home. Living the Trinity is continuing Jesus Christ's redeeming work, in bringing healing, reconciliation, justice and peace to our divided and troubled world. Living the Trinity is having the fruits of Spirit as the motivating force of all that we do. They are the Trinity's living power of God in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Amen.