



ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Trinity Sunday

12th June 2022

All Saints' Marseille

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I wonder if you have ever encountered something so beautiful that you wanted everyone else to appreciate it too, but you found it almost too difficult to describe. Being in love is a good example. Over the last few weeks I have often travelled to Aix-en-Provence. As many of you will know, the road takes you past the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, which the artist Paul Cézanne painted numerous times as he tried to capture different effects of light playing on the side of the mountain. Where I live there is a cliff which I have tried endlessly (and ineptly) to photograph in the hope of conveying to people why I find it so beautiful, as the light alters the colour of the rock at different times of the day. No photograph can ever do it justice, though. It is never as good as the real thing.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the best way the early church came to arriving at an expression of the mystery of the nature of God. The notion of God being

three persons in one was first articulated fully in the fourth century, though some of the language of the Trinity is already there in the New Testament. Paul ends his second Letter to the Corinthians with the words: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (2 Cor. 13.13). And, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's parting words to his closest followers are that they are to '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). But it took another four centuries to distil it into a doctrine of the church.

The doctrine of the Trinity has caused controversy, schism and even warfare. But churches and theologians have always disagreed about things. The problem is that faith engages not only our deepest emotions and commitments, but also our deepest sense of who we are, in relation both to God and to one another. Within the Church of England alone there have been endless fallings out, quite apart from its turbulent early decades. Two hundred years ago the argument was about the abolition of slavery. A hundred and fifty years ago it was about the nature of the Eucharist. Forty years ago it was about how we should understand the Resurrection. Thirty years ago (though after a much longer debate) the argument was about whether women should be ordained as priests, and as little as ten years ago it was about whether they should be appointed as bishops. For the last thirty years the debate has been about whether or not LGBTI+ people should be welcomed fully into the church, an issue that is due to come to a head within the next twelve months. And all of this is just within the Church of England.

A thousand years ago, in 1054, there was a seismic falling out between the Churches of the East and West over one small phrase in the Nicene Creed (which

we will say in a few minutes): the so-called *filioque* (meaning ‘and the Son’) – in other words, whether the Holy Spirit ‘proceeds’ from the Father only (as the Eastern Orthodox tradition holds) or from the Father ‘and the Son’ (as the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches maintain – these words having been added to the Roman liturgy in 1014). In truth, the argument was wider than this, part of a long-running battle for power between Rome and Constantinople which in the end proved irreconcilable. But the *filioque* clause was blamed, and it still causes a *frisson* between Eastern and Western traditions, as we are reminded each time we devise attempt to an ecumenical liturgy in Marseille.

Partly as a result of this history of controversy and difficulty, the doctrine of the Trinity also causes chronic anxiety to preachers on this Sunday, as they feel they ought to be able to explain it clearly. There is often talk of shamrocks (one plant with three leaves). In the village where I grew up, the local Reader was also the pharmacist as well as being an accomplished conjuror. I recall him pointing out on Trinity Sunday that he was encountered in the community in three different forms but that he was still the same person.

It’s worth remembering that the word ‘*persona*’ in Latin referred to the mask worn by actors in the theatre. Actors wore masks not in order to disguise themselves but to play different roles. The root of the word ‘*persona*’ means to ‘speak through’ – which was literally true in the case of an actor’s mask. For Christians, the one God is experienced in three different ways: God as Creator, prominent in the Old Testament; God as Redeemer, understood in the Gospels through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and God as Spirit or Sanctifier, received by the early Church at Pentecost, enabling it to go out and share the message of self-sacrificial love that lies at the heart of all things. Some

theologians have focussed on how the Trinity also expresses an internal dynamic within the Godhead, a constant interplay of loving relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. Our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning express this beautifully, in different ways.

Yet, as we contemplate the nature of God, in the end we find that language falls short, as photography does in attempting to convey the wonder of the natural world, for the nature of God is ultimately beyond our human comprehension. And so we must be willing to live with the mystery. Each of us, at our baptism, became part of that mystery. And each of us, in our Holy Communion today, can share in the mystery which is nothing less than an outpouring of the love of God. Acceptance of mystery – in some ways, that is what faith is all about.

As we saw on this Sunday last year, it is sometimes better to allow the mystery to speak to us through the medium of art rather than words. Contemplating the famous icon which you have at the top of your service sheets can be a good starting-point - Anton Rublev's icon of the Trinity, painted in the fifteenth century, with its three gentle presences inviting us into their communion.

It is good to sit with this icon for a while, allowing the welcome it conveys to permeate our soul. (The same icon is also used as a symbol of hospitality.) Enjoying the sense of being accepted into the relationship between the figures, noting how a space has been kept for us at their table, the circular table which after a time we realise is also shaped like a chalice. Wondering at the sense of our being welcomed into the dynamic of the divine love, of which across the centuries the Trinity is the best articulation the church has been able to find to express it. Reaching, however tentatively, and in awe and wonder, towards an

understanding of the God who is at once beyond us, beside us and within us, now and for ever.

The next nineteen Sundays are called Sundays 'after Trinity', otherwise known as 'ordinary time'. In the rhythm of the church's calendar, from Advent to Pentecost we are offered half a year to tell and retell the events of our salvation, and then half a year to work that message deeper into our lives. Six months to celebrate what God has done; six months to contemplate who God is – the eternal 'I AM'. What a lovely thing to look forward to. Contemplating the one who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, to whom be the glory.

Amen.