

Sermon for 26th May 2024, Year B, Trinity Sunday

Preached at St Serf's, Shettleston

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Sermon

It's Trinity Sunday says the lectionary, that day when every year the hapless preacher tries to make sense of how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit can all be fully God, one God, in three persons.

It's the central defining characteristic of the Christian faith. We baptise and bless in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and if a church is not Trinitarian in its belief and practice, most theologians would say it's not truly a Christian Church.

But what difference does it make, really? Given all the problems in our human lives, all the difficulties we go through, the illnesses, the pains, the breakdowns of relationships, what does it matter whether we understand God as one, or three, or three in one and one in three?

The biggest arguments about all this were, after all, some 1700 years ago, when the Libyan priest Arius battled against Athanasius of Alexandria over whether Jesus was divine as well as human. Arius, and most of the early church at the time, held that Jesus had been created by God, just like the rest of us, but Athanasius, who was a young assistant to the Bishop of Alexandria, and 50 years younger than Arius, argued successfully that Jesus Christ was God in the same way that God the Father was God. This was all finalised at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. Hence, now, we have the Nicene creed, and indeed the Athanasian creed, which embody these conclusions.

But again, what difference does it really make? After all, many people have found the idea of Jesus as God rather difficult to swallow and would prefer to see Jesus purely as a wonderful spiritual teacher. Surely his teachings and example are the most important thing, rather than his divinity.

But today, the concept of God as a Trinity of divine persons has returned to the centre of theological study, because in our modern era when most people are pushed to be self-sufficient and individualistic, the idea that God is intrinsically social and communal suddenly speaks to our human need to be fully known, understood and accepted.

In John's gospel, Jesus depicts the relationship within the Trinity as one of endless mutual self-giving, a delighted deflection of attention from one to the other in joyful love. And the followers of Jesus are described as the recipients of the overflow of this love. Becoming a Christian disciple means to begin to participate in this same quality of relationship that exists within the bond of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus doesn't call us to bow down before an almighty and distant sky God, but to reimagine ourselves as caught up in the interweaving dance of loving divine relationship.

Theologians have a clever word for this dance – they call it 'perichoresis', which from the Greek literally means "dancing around". 'Peri' gives us 'perimeter', and from 'choresis' we get 'choreography'. It's probably my favourite theological concept, and it transforms our understanding of God from a faraway unchanging perfection to a tumbling intimacy of unconditional joy.

Suddenly there are no solid boundaries or division between Father, Son, Spirit and us as disciples; love dissolves the boundaries. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann called this the "intimate indwelling and complete interpenetration of the Trinity in one another".

If this is all true, then it shows us that the goal of God in the world is not to discipline us rigidly, but to join human and divine to become spiritually one. It's a vision of a human future in which all tragedy, divisions and conflicts are overcome, not through the domination of God's strict moral rule, but through intimate relationship with the divine and one another.

Often it is hard, if not impossible, to imagine what this might be like. What might it feel like to have the same sort of relationships between us as Jesus has with God the Father, to know one another so intimately and completely, to share all things with one another, all joys and sorrows, all needs and gifts, to never need to doubt that you are understood and appreciated, forgiven and loved, unconditionally? To never be alone in heart or mind again.

So often our human relationships are quite the opposite of this. Our barriers are always up. We expect and often experience misunderstanding and disapproval from those around us. We don't dare share what's on our hearts because we don't want to be judged or criticised. Many of us might even be happier if Christian worship was just about me and God and less about the tricky business of loving our neighbours.

Relationship is hard. Vulnerability is hard. It takes courage, and it's risky. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango, and in God's case it apparently takes three, so there's no way we're doing any of this on our own, by our own power or wisdom, such as it is.

Athanasius believed that Christ's divinity revealed that the unity of God must be a unity of loving relationship, in which the identity of each party is not swallowed up but made whole and completed in mutual self-giving. The only alternative to this would be the idea of God as an almighty tyrant, bringing perfection through domination and control, and many people still have this fearsome idea of God.

But God exercises power by giving, and by grace, not by force. This is the meaning and message of Trinity Sunday – that God’s nature is relational love, sustaining all things, including us, in perfect rhythmic dance. All we must do, to begin, is open our hearts and allow ourselves to be swept off our feet.

Song at midday:

God of almighty, changeless energy, creation’s secret source, holding all things,
in perfect rhythmic dance.

The heavens tell the glory of your work; day moving on to day, and night to night
proclaim its ordered sway.

Within our changing swiftly passing lives unite all hearts with yours, that praising
we may enter heaven’s courts.