

Sermon for Sunday 31st May, Year A, Trinity Sunday

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon

Knowing that today is Trinity Sunday, it's not hard to see exactly why our New Testament readings were chosen for the lectionary. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians ends with the words we know as 'The Grace': "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." And in the penultimate verse of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus commands his disciples to "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."

Both are rare examples when the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mentioned together in a single sentence. But despite the later prominence and importance of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, it would be a mistake to imagine that there was any fully developed understanding of what that meant back when the books of the New Testament were being written. Just hearing them in the same sentence hardly leads to the immediate conclusion that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three divine Persons in one God – co-equal, consubstantial and co-eternal. These complicated ideas weren't properly formulated until the council of Nicaea in 325AD, and even then, there was a huge argument about it.

You might be forgiven for thinking that after Jesus had ascended to heaven and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the early Church might immediately sit down and try to thrash out exactly what they believed about the relationship of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to God the Father, but at the time it didn't seem all that important. The early Church was much more concerned about how to unite

Jewish and Gentile followers of the Way of Jesus, and survive in a world where both Jewish and Roman leaders were trying to have them arrested and killed. There just wasn't time or need for ivory tower theologians to sit around trying to figure out whether Jesus was God, and if so, whether he was God in the same way that the Father was God, and if so, how they both related to the Holy Spirit, who had entered believers' hearts just as Jesus had left.

For the most part, formal Christian doctrines tended to be built in the same way that armies erected bridges – hurriedly assembled on the fly in times of need and crafted to fulfil the purpose of a people on a mission.

It is much like the way rules and laws are created in any society. Until there is some kind of problem, there is no need for any rules to fix it. If you read the religious rules followed by any monastic community, including those created by St Benedict or St Francis, you will soon discover some rather curious instructions that make you wonder 'what on earth happened that they needed to enforce that?' For example, back in Cornwall, where I was the warden of a small community of young people discerning a vocation to Christian ministry, we had to implement a community rule that 'there shall be no singing in the house without the permission of all community members,' which sounds really strict and random until you ask yourself what might have happened to make that necessary. I'll leave you to imagine.

The problem in the early fourth century, now that persecution against Christians had ended and Rome had become a Christian state, was the realisation that there had emerged a major disagreement about the nature of God, and specifically whether Jesus Christ was God or human, or, somehow, both. The early Church leaders concluded that this wasn't a mild philosophical disagreement but a something fundamental that would radically determine the meaning of the faith for all generations to come. And so, they convened the Council of Nicaea to address the question.

On one side was Arius, who believed that God was a singular, isolated, utterly transcendent being, who had created Jesus and given him divine abilities to perform his mission. On the other was Athanasius, who argued that God was plural, involved, relational, both immanent – with us – and transcendent – beyond us.

For Arius, God was an utterly unique, self-contained and self-sufficient reality. To say that from eternity, God had an equal partner or partners in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, implied some kind of need or vulnerability in the Father, that made him imperfect like humanity. Arius believed in a fixed unchanging central power in the universe that could not be moved by the vicissitudes of mortal life.

Athanasius, though, believed that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ revealed a very different kind of divinity, one in which there was, is, and always will be mutual self-giving. The unity within God is, in Athanasius's view, "a unity of love, a unity in which the identity of each party is not swallowed up, but established." God's power, in this perspective, is not domineering like human leaders who 'lord it over' others. Rather, God's power is always self-giving. In this view, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in a state of constant mutual indwelling and interweaving, and the nature of the three-in-one God is fundamentally relational, like a dance whirling around you, not a statue on a far distant hill.

This is why, when Jesus encounters the coercive powers and authorities that mean to take his life on earth, he doesn't try to rigidly protect himself and hold on to it. Instead, he serves us by yielding to the threat, knowing that his life rests not in exercising power but in God's love. In doing so, Jesus exposes the futility of satanic power, that only knows how to rule by cruel domination and control, much as we see in the hearts of many leaders throughout the world, who cannot bring themselves to share power with anyone, and whose highest virtue is loyalty and obedience – to them, of course.

In contrast, the profound blessing of the Holy Trinity is that there is no limit to how many may share in that divine dance of love. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are always inviting us to take one another's hands and to be caught up in that quiet, peaceful, fiery whirlwind of God's holy presence, that does not coerce but serves and persuades.

Now, I'm personally very glad that Athanasius won the argument, and as a result we understand God as fundamentally a divine, loving relationship, not distant perfection. This seems to match the God I have met in my own times of prayer – always invitational, forgiving, gentle, encouraging, never coercive, strict, distant, authoritarian. It also seems to match the God that Jesus demonstrated in his life and teaching with stories like the Prodigal Son, where the Father runs out to forgive and restore his relationship with his son, before the son can even fumble out an apology.

Admittedly, philosophically speaking, a single perfect distant implacable God is much easier to understand than a constantly interweaving dance of three persons having always existed in a relationship of intermingling love, throughout all time. But I'm glad the Church decided we have the latter.

I don't want to finish my sermon, however, without acknowledging the reality of doubt. Verse 17 of our Gospel reading says this: "And having seen Jesus, they worshipped Him, but some doubted." The latest version of the New Revised Standard Version bible even says this: "They worshipped Him, but they doubted." Not *some* doubted. *They* doubted. All of them still had doubts. At the ending of his Gospel, in the middle of the call to go and make disciples throughout the world, in the midst of wonder at the glory of the Resurrection, Matthew chooses to make room for doubt to be included too.

So, I'm not too anxious about getting the doctrine of the Trinity straight in my head or worrying if I believe exactly the right things. I just remember that God is love, and we are God's children; and there is no room for fear in love.