

LIVING THE TRINITY

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me. Good to be back in Oxford and to be with you in Worcester Chapel.

Playing golf yesterday with one of the leaders of the Reformed Jews who asked about my sermon for today – what's the Trinity? I explained it is why we are not Jewish!

A mixture of plurality and unity is at the heart of our faith in God as Trinity - three persons in one God.

Problem is that the Trinity seems very complicated - impression of threeness and oneness - but not much else. Many Christians are like that. Even the BCP talks in the old Athanasian Creed of the 'father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Ghost - yet not three incomprehensibles'. Of course, you know that 'incomprehensible' = limitless, infinite rather than not able to be understood - yet many people do find the Trinity incomprehensible - in terms of sects, Jehovah's Witness & Mormons. Also, it is what distinguishes us from the other great monotheistic religions of the Book, Judaism and Islam. Whatever the different Christian traditions, we share the distinctive faith in God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - as seen in our readings and hymns.

Even some Christians, if we are honest, find the Trinity hard to understand. But what does it actually all mean, for us here in Chapel? You see, I do not want to talk about the theology of the Trinity, (you may be relieved to hear) but about the experience of God as Trinity in our worship and Christian life. The early church did not come up with the idea of the Trinity as a doctrine with which to befuddle future generations. They discovered in their Christian experience God as Father, known in Jesus of Nazareth and still present with them through his Spirit. The Trinity is to be experienced and worshipped before we come to doctrinal or theological debate.

A helpful Grove Spirituality booklet - Peter Adam, *Living the Trinity*, has greatly influenced my thinking over the years. He looks at the different Christian traditions and talks of three kinds of churches - Father, Son Holy Spirit. He suggest that many churches concentrate on one person of the Trinity in their life and experience which affects worship, beliefs and behaviour.

1 CHURCH OF THE FATHER

Amazing and wonderful scope of his vision of God the Father - everything starts with the Father and returns to him.

Stress God as Father, *pater*, of all patria, creator of Universe, care for the world. Stress on Transcendence.

God's revelation to Moses in burning bush – name 'I am' – existence.

Hymns like *Immortal, invisible, O Worship the king*.

Concern for all life - catholic in the best and broadest sense - according to the whole – *kath' holos* - holistic approach to all people of good will, annual services for different local groups, brotherhood of all human beings. No boundaries, inclusive.

The Eucharist will be central - seen as thanksgiving and offering of the whole of life to God - glorified Harvest Festival every week!.

Does this ring any bells? My curacy at Bromley - civic church. True also inevitably of a University Chapel – King's or here in Worcester - involved in many areas of University life.

Positive aspects - but there is another side of the coin; strong on the Father, less allowance for the Son and Spirit. Strong on creation, weak on human sin. Strong on grace and love, but less on salvation through the death of God the Son, or the disturbing energy of God the Holy Spirit.

"It will be embarrassed by a sermon on the sinfulness of man and annoyed at a gospel which lets prostitutes into the Kingdom before respectable people . . . 'decently and in order' is the absolute test of worship, and any interruption of Matins by the Spirit would produce a horrified silence, followed by lengthy disapproval over Sunday lunch" (Peter Adam, p. 8)

2 CHURCH OF THE SON

Several versions depending on which aspect of Jesus - Christ the radical, the sufferer.

Fervent commitment to person of Jesus of Nazareth, prayers and hymns addressed to him

How sweet the name of Jesus in a believer's ear.

O Jesus, I have promised

Stress on need for personal response to Christ's death on the cross, salvation - believer.

John 3.3 – 'born again'; 3.16-17 'God so loved the world'

Eucharist becomes the Lord's Supper - stress on the saving and atoning death of Jesus.

Clear sense of those who are Christians - and those who are not boundaries, not vague and wishy washy like the inclusive Church of the Father.

Leads to a real commitment to evangelism and mission at the risk of suffering or persecution.

If Father is best seen in catholic, then the Son in the evangelical tradition.

Weaknesses:

Strong sense of identity can lead to isolation, even holy huddle

Mission restricted just to preaching, no social action and serving the whole community as in church of Father.

The warm response and devotion to Jesus and his salvation may lead to not getting hands dirty in real world.

If Father is true of University chapels, many of the student churches are churches of the Son – centrality of Jesus.

3 CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Holy Spirit traditionally the neglected person the Trinity - partly because of the stress in NT of the HS bringing us to the Son and the Father.

Traditionally seen in Pentecostal churches - but recent renewal movements across all the mainline denominations means that you can find churches of the Spirit everywhere now.

Dynamic and lively worship - stress on Immanence.

Back to John 3: vv 6-8 'born of Spirit, wind blows where it chooses'

Lots of different people inspired to participate - share gifts of God powerful and miraculous signs of God's presence.

Eucharist is really only a warm up for the real free worship to follow, while communion is probably discovered in the fellowship over coffee afterwards

Weakness - can fall into sensationalism, a neglect of the quiet, missing presence of God in ordinary things of life, rather than the spectacular.

No need to go to doctor, just pray about it; believe six impossible things before breakfast.

To a certain extent this is true of our church in London now - seeking everything new - any songs over a year old are out, don't bother to plan the worship, just let it happen. Can be good and lively, can be an excuse for terrible disorganization! Yet the converse is true - we can avoid the dangers by planning everything - and not being open to God the comforter and disturber, giver of life, whose tongues of flame and rushing wind upset our peace and quiet!

CONCLUSION - TRINITY IN UNITY

I wonder if these pen portraits have rung any bells. Think for a moment about your regular worship or church preference. How do you view the Eucharist or Communion. To whom are your usual hymns addressed? How do you respond to the community around - in service or evangelism or acts of power? Do you have a strong sense of boundaries as to who is a member or is it all rather fuzzy at the edges? What about your own personal spiritual life? do you respond to the steady moral demands of our Father in heaven, or in loving devotion to following Jesus, or go with the flow in unpredictable abandonment to the winds of the Spirit? Think about your favourite hymns or songs, or your prayers - and they will tell you a lot. I suspect that among us as individuals there will be all three traditions. So what are we to do?

One response is to look at our traditions. I have suggested that the church of the Father emerges from a catholic tradition, while that of the Son from evangelical and the Spirit from a Pentecostal or Charismatic. This does not necessarily mean the denominations - my three examples are all Anglican churches! This breadth of traditions is one of the gifts of the diverse life of God the Holy Trinity to the church - and it would be wrong to suggest that we solve the problem of this diversity by obliterating our differences and ways of worshipping into a dull grey lowest common denominator. That has been one of the problems affecting the ecumenical movement since its inception.

Another possible response is to use my simple caricatures to pigeonhole others - or yourself. After I had said some of the above in a previous sermon once, one rather grand lady confided to me on the way out of church that she was a 'father Christian'. She was obviously very happy to put this label on herself and it explained to her why she could not stand all these fervent Son-Christians or happy clappy Spirit-Christians.

But neither the lowest common denominator, nor the pigeonholing approach will do. This is missing out on the richness and diverse fullness of the Trinity. Not a shallow agreement, nor a sticking on one edge enjoying our one bit - but entering into the whole lot. God the Holy Trinity is a diversity of persons in a unity of divine love - the everlasting dance of love which goes on between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - *perichoresis* - the whirling dance of love within the very heart of God - and he, not they, longs for us to be caught up into the dance.

In the end of the day we cannot be Father Christians, or churches of the Son, or Spirit congregations, but only Trinitarian Christians within the one church visible and invisible, militant here on earth and triumphant there in heaven.

That is why it is important that we come together in worship and in prayer to enrich each other and to learn from each other's experience - and this is probably more fruitful as a way of recognizing the presence of the Trinitarian God in our unity than ecumenical doctrine commissions, important though they are. We all need to be a church of the Holy Trinity, trusting in our Father who made us and all the world, responding to Jesus Christ who died to save us and wants us to follow him rejoicing the power of the Holy Spirit so that all creation might be transformed in the dance of love in the very heart of God.

And now,

To God the Father, who loved us and made us
accepted in the Beloved;
To God the Son, who loved us and loosed us
from our sins by his own blood;
TO God the Holy Spirit, who sheds the love of
God abroad in our hearts;
To the one true God be all love and all glory
in the church and the world
for all time and eternity, Amen.