

ONE GOD, YET THREE

⇒ Today, of course, is Trinity Sunday, and this mystery of God being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three, yet one, and one, yet three, is one that has probably baffled Christians ever since the doctrine was developed. It has caused many preachers, including ministers, to shy away from preaching on this particular Sunday, or to ignore the fact that it's Trinity Sunday because the Trinity is such a difficult concept to understand, and many, sadly, have seen it is a dry and abstract doctrine. But surely, it is a doctrine with which we might want to grapple, or perhaps should be prepared to grapple if we want to enrich our relationship with God, and if we are going to recognise what value it has in our daily living.

.....I'm sure we'd all agree that God reveals himself in different ways to each one of us. We've all had very different experiences of Him that bring us here today; we will have encountered Him in a variety of ways that have brought us to this point in our lives. But, if all we could rely upon for our view of God was our own personal experience, we could well be in trouble, for God is much bigger than our limited experience and knowledge of him.

⇒ Many of you will be familiar with the story of *"an ancient village where all the inhabitants were blind. One day five of the men from the village came across an elephant. They had heard about elephants before, but they had never been near one before. Of course, being blind, they needed to feel the animal in order to discover what it was like, so they all felt the elephant and then went back to their village to tell the others all about it.*

.....*One man told the villagers that the elephant was like "a great thick wall" - he had felt the animal's side. The second man declared that it was like "a short, round, smooth, sharp spear" - he had felt the tusk. The third man claimed that it was like "a large piece of wool carpet" - he had felt the elephant's ear. Like "a giant snake" was how the fourth man, who had felt the trunk, described it, and finally the fifth man, who had felt the leg, said it was "round and thick, like a tree."*

.....*To this day, those men cannot agree on what an elephant looks like.*

⇒ And so, our picture of God, can become so much bigger, and fuller, and truer, as we listen to other people's stories of their experiences of Him, and their encounters with Him. Our Christian tradition is made up of just that, other people's experiences and thoughts and that's where our doctrine of the Trinity comes from. It's a doctrine which does cause a great deal of difficulty, a doctrine which we are unlikely to ever understand fully or master, but at its heart, it is a way of all of us learning something more of the mystery of God.

.....Over the years, as I have run nurture groups of membership classes, I have had many opportunities to work together with people as we all try to get our heads around this aspect of our Christian faith. And, like many other people I've used a variety of illustrations in an attempt to help people gain that understanding, and of course, different things work for different people, a variety of symbols *"make the penny drop"* for a variety of people.

.....During that time we have talked of God as being like:

- water, ice, and steam - three different ways in which H₂O exists
- a shamrock - one leaf, yet made up of three individual leaves
- a cube - one shape, yet with three dimensions, height, depth, and width

- a plait - three strands joined together to make one, and gaining strength from their togetherness

.....amongst others, but the illustration I liked best and found most helpful, presumably because I have a bit of a mathematical mind, was the one that is simply a sum, and I'll share it with you now.

.....Some other religions have often criticised Christians for the doctrine of the Trinity because they see it as having, and worshipping three gods rather than one. This criticism stems from the fact that they have seen the equation as $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, which of course, all you mathematicians out there will know is right, but if we change the plus symbol to a multiplication symbol the equation becomes something quite different - $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. We are not adding one god to another, but rather we are taking one God and multiplying his greatness and his magnitude by including all his attributes and qualities.

.....The doctrine of the Trinity is not some sort of supernatural conjuring trick, the like of which we would expect to see in the David Blaine show, whereby one being is equal to three beings, but rather it is an aid to help us understand the richness of God's being. The theologian Macquarrie said *"the symbol of the Trinity reminds us that we can say of God, on the one hand, he is a unity; there is only one God. But on the other hand, as the ultimate, he must contain in himself an unimaginable richness of being."*

.....I guess that one of the huge challenges that faces the world today is the competing ideas about God and in our human arrogance, many of us want to impose our views on others. But, as followers of Jesus, we are offered a vision of God that hopefully prevents us from adopting any arrogance about our understanding of God, because we are forced to acknowledge the mystery that is behind all the words we read and the limited experiences we enjoy.

⇒ So, even though some of the analogies I used earlier may help us to understand a little more of what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about, it is in essence a way of describing how God relates to us. The Pentecost experience, which we celebrated in our churches last week, helped people to realise that they prayed and related to the Father in the Spirit who had been given to them, and through the Son who had revealed the Father, and the passages of scripture we have heard today seem to confirm that this Trinitarian relationship is a family one.

.....This idea of relationships is often another way in which we try to help one another understand this mysterious doctrine of the Trinity. For example, although I am only one person, I can be several different things to various individuals at the same time.

.....For instance

- to my Mum Sylvia, I am a daughter,
- to my brother Graham, I am a sister, and
- to my husband Leslie, I am a wife.

.....There is only one 'me', but whilst being me, I can be daughter, sister and wife all at the same time, and of course, the ways in which I relate to my Mum, my brother and my husband are all very different. I guess we'd think it rather strange if that wasn't the case!

.....And, all of you could think of a set of relationships like that in your own life, where each relationship is quite different, and you behave very differently in response to the individuals concerned. But, all of these relationships make us the people we are, and

each one enriches our lives and allows us to enjoy life at varying levels, and see it from different angles and perspectives. If any one of our potential relationships became marred in some way, then our lives would be the poorer for that.

.....But I guess it's fair to say that in our Western culture we are sometimes too individualistic and very often we lose our sense of needing to stay connected to one another and be responsible for one another. Within the life of the church and our community we recognise the need to hold each other accountable, both those who lead and those who follow. But we're often reluctant to participate in relationships that enable that to happen. However, we also recognise that it's healthy for us to have relationships in which qualities such as grace, mercy and compassion are more important than judgement and perhaps those relationships are somewhat easier to sustain. But all of these relationships reflect the nature of God; his invitation to experience his love through being part of a community, but also his challenge of our weakness and failure. We experience something of the triune nature of God through the variety of relationships that we experience.

⇒ The verses which we heard from Romans today are about the whole work of the one God within a human life. The passage from Mark's gospel is about the whole work of the one God through a particular occasion. In both cases, the three aspects of the Trinity are mentioned, and the emphasis in these readings is on the ways we are called to respond to God, however he chooses to reveal himself to us.

.....Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that our relationship with God as our Heavenly Father is only made possible by all three aspects of the Trinity working together:

.....It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the assurance that we are 'sons' or 'children of God', because he declares us to be so, just as he publicly declared Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism and again at his resurrection. We will recall from our gospel reading that immediately John the Baptist had performed the baptism, the Spirit descended on Jesus and the Father's voice was heard to declare his status as God's son.

.....Though there is a sense in which God is 'Father' to all of humankind because he created us, and made us in his own image, not everyone has the right to be called his child. We only receive that privilege when we respond to the depth of love which was expressed by the death of Jesus the Son on the cross.

.....It is only by Jesus Christ's act of grace in suffering a cruel and horrific death, that we can enter into a relationship with God the Father, but it is the work and the witness of the Holy Spirit which pronounces us to be the 'children of God', and enables us to say those special words "*Abba Father*" signifying the closeness of that relationship.

⇒ The relationship which we can enjoy with God as Father is in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, emphasising the fact that the three persons of the Trinity always work together, therefore it is vital that we do not emphasise any one part over and above the others.

.....Always thinking of

- God as a loving Father may mean that we are in danger of thinking that we can do just as we please, and we can all believe what we want to believe if it works for us.
- God as the Son who came to earth may mean that we put too much emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and fail to see the divine nature as well.

- God as the Holy Spirit may encourage us to place too much store on our experiences and our feelings.

.....Of course, there may well be times in our lives when we are more aware of

- God the Father, parenting us, nurturing us, disciplining us, or
- God the Son, saving us, being our example, or
- God the Holy Spirit, comforting us, directing us

.....but we must respond to each part of the Trinity, if we are to truly become and enjoy the fullness of what it means to be the 'children of God.'