

## **Sunday 7 June 2020**

### **Trinity Sunday**

**The Rev'd Colleen Clayton**

**Texts:**

**2 Corinthians 13.11-13**

**Matthew 28.16-20**

In an art class at a Catholic primary school, a little girl sat hunched over her paper, drawing with absolute focus, the tip of her tongue slightly protruding as she concentrated. The teacher, seeing her engrossed in her work approached her and asked what she was drawing. “God”, said the little girl, without looking up from her work. Laughing, the teacher said, “But no-one knows what God looks like!” Exasperated by the further interruption, the little girl stopped, looked up at the teacher and replied, “They will when I have finished!”

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when we wrestle with what the Triune God looks like and with what it looks like for us to have a truly Trinitarian faith.

Across the centuries there have been many attempts to explain the Trinity. The early theologians wrestled with how Christians could understand and express their new insights about God. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the words of the Athanasian Creed for the first time formulated a Trinitarian doctrine;

“Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.”

To this, many Christians have added, and the whole lot, incomprehensible!

The little girl in the joke may have been on the right track because some of the most effective means we have for understanding the Trinity are not words but images.

One of the most loved images of the Trinity is the fifteenth century icon by Andrei Rublev, known as, “The Hospitality of Abraham”. This icon is based on the Genesis 18 story of Abraham offering hospitality to three angels. These three, in iconography, are seen by Christians as an expression of the Trinity as

they speak and act as one. The movement in the icon circles from one figure to the next, drawing us in and inviting us to fill the empty place at the table.

However rich and beautiful the images we contemplate, and however nuanced and sophisticated the words we craft, we could still ask why it makes any difference to us to understand God as Trinity.

The German theologian, Karl Rahner, has said that;

“Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’. We must be willing to admit that should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”<sup>1</sup>

I find this a confronting thought! Our scriptures speak of God as creator, as the eternal Word incarnate in humanity, as life-giving, energising Spirit. Jesus speaks about God his Father who has sent him and who will send the Holy Spirit. What difference does it make to consciously worship a Trinitarian God?

I think the Gospel reading set for today helps us to answer this question. After Jesus’ resurrection he comes to his disciples in Galilee. When they see him, some of his disciples worship him, some doubt, and some, I imagine, do both. Jesus tells them to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that he has commanded them (Matthew 28.19-20a).

Some of the disciples still have doubts, but Jesus doesn’t sit down and try to help them understand the Trinity. Instead, he sends them to the world to fulfill God’s purpose which is to love, save and bless, absolutely everyone. The Trinity is not about understanding, it is about practice. The Trinity is missional; God’s nature is an endless flow of love and self-giving. To believe in a Trinitarian God should fill us with the same kind of missional desire, not to make sure that everyone understands and believes in the same way as us, but to share with others the love, salvation and blessing that we have received.

A Trinitarian faith is inherently relational; based on the flow of love that is God. In the first creation story in Genesis, God creates us in God’s own image. We are made as mirrors of God’s love and of God’s identity. We are created to be in relationship with each other and with God who is by nature creative, dynamic, inviting; a relationship of love.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner. *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 10-11.

And it is not just humanity that reflects the nature of God. The more scientists discover about the universe, the more its relational nature is revealed. This is true at both the micro- and the macro- level. Healthy ecosystems are balanced and sustained by the complex interactions between living things and their environment. Planets are held in orbit by immense powers that simultaneously draw them together and keep them apart while they spin and move. Subatomic particles are held together so strongly that to force them apart unleashes the power of a nuclear bomb.

The richness, the life, the power in all these examples does not lie in the individual things but in the relationship between them; in what flows through the spaces. Break the relationship, stop the flow, and life is damaged or destroyed. The life of our church is the same. When our relationships with each other are broken, we cannot live abundantly.

We worship a God who is relationship; three persons, one God, and that should make a difference to who we are. As we become more Trinitarian in our faith our lives will more accurately reflect the One who made us. We will begin to see the world as one of wholeness through diversity and strength through interdependence. We will no longer be able to easily separate the world into the ‘goodies’ and the ‘baddies’. Instead we will see that God who is relationship is always creating, allowing possibilities, bringing about transformation and making things whole.

Rowan Williams puts it like this;

“The doctrines of Christ and of the Trinity can seem remarkably remote and theoretical to most people these days; what we seem to forget is that they were designed in order not only to tell us the truth about God but to make us live that truth. They are *invitations*, ways of passing on Jesus’ invitation to be changed, to repent and trust him, to walk with him”.

This means that we cannot work together nicely on the surface while continuing to seethe with anger and hatred towards each other underneath. The divine flow of love is inherent in the building blocks of life. It demands of us that we be authentic and real; pretence will not do.

To truly worship the flow of relational love that is God, means a radical change in our vision and in our way of being so that we see relationship as foundational to who we are called to be. We are invited to change, repentance, trust. This is a difficult frustrating way to live. It was this kind of living that led Jesus to the cross, because a God who is by nature relationship could only remain in loving connection, even when that meant death. That is the way of life to which our

relational God calls us and which our world desperately needs; life lived with such a strong sense of our inter-connection that we realise that anything that hurts others, hurts us too.

This is a vulnerable way to live. “Human strength admires autonomy; God’s mystery rests in mutuality”.<sup>2</sup> Allowing ourselves to be open to the flow of God’s love, being vulnerable and risking staying in relationship, means that we cannot just rely on a set of rigid beliefs or unshakeable rules. It means that we must engage with the world in love, working at staying connected, asking questions, listening to the answers and struggling with the implications. That is a much harder thing to do. It’s what Jesus did.

In the words of St Paul from our reading from his second letter to the Corinthians; Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Cor 13.11b).

Our Triune God invites us to experience the relationship of love that is God’s nature, to join the divine dance, to allow ourselves to become swept up in the energy of love that transforms us and our relationships, to enter the dynamism of the flow of love through the ‘spaces between’, rejoicing in the whole lot, incomprehensible!

The Lord be with you.

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<sup>2</sup> Rohr with Morrell. *The Divine Dance*, 59.