

### Trinity Sunday: A Humbler, Simpler, Bolder Approach

I've clearly drawn the short straw. Trinity Sunday has the reputation for being the Sunday when clergy will take annual leave if they possibly can. And who can blame them? I'm of a generation that remembers having to recite the Athanasian Creed on Trinity Sunday: that incredibly long doctrinal statement about the Trinity which as a chorister I thought was as dull as dishwater and could be summarised in the often repeated word within it 'incomprehensible'. If I'm honest, looking back at my attempts at its interpretation over the years, I realise that I've done a fairly good job in making the Trinity even more incomprehensible. But that said, I do notice that I've been somewhat a follower of theological fashion over the years too.

In my 25 year collection of addresses and sermons, I find a pattern. Early sermons from my curacy attempt to try and explain the Trinity. I find notes from a children's talk that use the illustration of a three leafed clover; or the ways in which ice, water and steam are different expressions of the same thing. They're all doctrinally heretical. And then later sermons tend to focus on making sense of the Trinity and in so doing lean heavily on Andrei Rublev's 15th century Icon *The Hospitality of Abraham*. It's probably the most famous of all Russian icons. Whilst it depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre, it's most often been interpreted as a depiction of the three persons of the Trinity sat around a square table. One of the most common observations of this icon is that the side of the table facing the onlooker is vacant, and so it draws you into itself and to the hospitality of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I'm not sure what the theological fashion is these days, but I find myself in a place where I increasingly want to ask 'what difference does all this really make'? What difference does an understanding of God the Trinity make to a world that is ridden by disease (as we continue to witness the horrendous scenes in India); that is torn apart by conflict (as over two hundred lives have been lost on the Gaza strip in the last few weeks); that is plagued by injustice (rightly re-exposed by the killing of George Floyd last year)? What difference does it make to our country as it seeks to emerge from the pandemic and rebuild community, economy, education, health provision, leadership and much else? What difference does it make to me (as I sit in the hours of the night, at the bedside of my poorly mother, the victim of a condition undiagnosed during the Covid crisis), and to you in the joys and sorrows of your life? What difference might reflecting on God the Holy Trinity really make in this midst of all this mess?

The difference it makes for us, as disciples of Jesus, is that the Trinity is at the heart of who we understand God to be. And this has a direct consequence on who we understand ourselves to be. Genesis 1:26 tells us that we are made in the image of God. So questions about the nature of God are also questions about the nature of human beings. Learning about who God is, helps us to understand who we are and what God asks of us. And perhaps there's never been a time where we've so urgently needed to return to basics and do some of this thinking more than now. Of course the Scriptures contain no explicit doctrine of the Trinity. The word's not mentioned at all. But most orthodox theologians, apologists and philosophers, from the time of Tertullian in the 3rd century, hold that the doctrine can be inferred from what the Scriptures teach us about God. As I reflected upon the three appointed readings for today, I found myself doing so through the lens of the vision recently shared by our Archbishops for a church that is humbler, simpler and bolder.

Isaiah points us towards humility. His calling has long been read on Trinity Sunday - I assume because of the triple Holy, Holy, Holy sung by the angels at the awesome revelation of God in the Temple. If we look a bit further, though, we see both glory and mystery: glory that is seen through the robe and smoke and seraphs that filled the temple; mystery that is unseen for God cannot be contained, cannot be compassed, by Isaiah's vision, by my sermon or indeed any other attempt. But what is significant for me in this story is Isaiah's response. 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'. The vision of God the Holy Trinity, set before us today, is articulated so beautifully in John Neale's words 'how shall I sing thy majesty which angels do admire? Let dust in dust and silence lie, sing, sing ye heavily choir. Thousands and thousands stand around thy throne, O God most high, ten thousand times, ten thousand sounds, thy praise, but *who am I?*

St Paul answers this question with alarming simplicity. I wouldn't dare describe his letter to the Romans as simple in any way. But the short extract from chapter 8 in our second reading today expresses the most fundamental and transformational truth about our identity before this awesome God. For, according to Paul, we are not just made in his image (as Genesis teaches us), but are adopted as children of this one who sits on a throne. For 'when we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ' (Romans 8:16). Again, I assume this reading features today because of the trinitarian reference in this verse, working together to incorporate us into the dynamic life of the Godhead. But there's a key thing we easily miss here. For 'ALL who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God' (Romans 8:14). Note that in the same way that the Athanasian Creed declares there's not a hint of inequality amongst the persons of the Godhead, St Paul makes clear here there's not a hint of inequality amongst God's children either. We're equal in status with no discrimination, no favourites, no precedence. It's the reason why racial justice, social justice, Living in Love and Faith and so many of our current agendas as a church are not just good things to talk about. They're core, fundamental, to our belief about God the Holy Trinity and what it means to be his children.

And then St John continues to unfold the divine mystery with a story about boldness. It begins with a human boldness and ends with a divine boldness as it travels from the darkness of Nicodemus' questioning to the light of the new life which Jesus offers him. Nicodemus is bold because he asks about what he doesn't understand. How many of us have lacked the courage to do this over the years? I was so grateful as a theological student for Marcus. He was the one who always articulated the questions the rest of us were pondering but lacked the courage to ask. So how can one climb back into a mother's womb and be born again? Jesus carries Nicodemus from the night of his ignorance into the light of his revelation - a light which reveals that new birth makes everything look different. We are enabled to see the character of the Father, who so loved the world that he sent his Son, in whose life we share by the power of the Spirit. And here we see the boldness of the Holy Trinity: love in John's Gospel is a verb. The word doesn't remain word but becomes flesh in the most costly way. I'm grateful for a mother who sought to model this and taught me to preach the Gospel, using words if necessary. The love that we find deep at the heart of the Trinity is unconditional but also sacrificial - there's no cheap grace.

And so as the curtain lifts today on the second half of the church's year (when we focus upon Christian teaching, as opposed to the events of Jesus' life), the Trinity forms the firmest foundation on which we seek to build as prayerful confident disciples in daily life.

It humbles us through glimpsing the incomprehensible glory and mystery of the Lord who 'doth all beings keep. Whose knowledge is the only line, to sound so vast a deep. Who is a sea without a shore, a sun without a sphere. Whose time is now and evermore, whose place is everywhere'.<sup>1</sup>

It blesses us by drawing us into its life through being children of the Father, adopted through the grace of Jesus the Son, and born again through the work of the Spirit - who lives within us and enables us to call Him 'Abba, Father', and so each other brothers and sisters in Christ.

It challenges us through the expectation that those who are born of the spirit, live by the spirit with the words 'here am I, send me', always on our lips - seeking to make incarnate in our being the life of the Holy Trinity for the sake of Transforming Church, Transforming Lives.

To that holy and incomprehensible Trinity be all honour and glory, this Trinity Sunday and always.

R Paul Davies  
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For 30 May 2021

Diocese of  
**Guildford**   
TRANSFORMING CHURCH  
TRANSFORMING LIVES

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<sup>1</sup> John Mason (1646 - 1694), How shall I sing that majesty?