

The Lord is One

Shema Yisrael is a key text for Jews (to be recited twice daily) from Deuteronomy 6.4: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.* In contrast to the cultic diversity of its region; in distinction to what it found in exile; in opposition to the pantheons of its Greek and Roman oppressors, Israel held on to God's revelation of his one-ness.

Trinity Sunday is perhaps the only major festival devoted not to an event or a person, but to a doctrine. That tends to lead preachers, particularly those who are starting out, to feel that their challenging task is to try to explain it – I probably did that myself. And the name Trinity Sunday tends to put the emphasis on the three-ness of God – so that's where most of us start. Over the years, I've come to the conclusion that setting out to explain the Trinity isn't a good objective – certainly not an inspiring one for most congregations. And that the function of the doctrine of the Trinity is to emphasise not the three-ness of God, but his one-ness.

The origins of the doctrine lie in the urge that the first Christians felt after the resurrection to worship Jesus as Lord. We know from the New Testament that to many orthodox Jews this was blasphemy. Yet asserting anything less than the full divinity of Christ didn't seem to fit. And then there was their experience of the Holy Spirit, conveying the presence of God and the person of Jesus in a way that was both authentic and personal. The doctrine of the Trinity, while maintaining the lordship of Christ, and the identity and origin of the Spirit, was a way of saying that God is still God; and God is still one.

The place of Trinity Sunday in the calendar also brings us back to the reality of God. As Christians, we profess to know God through Jesus Christ – the human being who is God and shows us God. In John's Gospel, seeing and knowing are very close: Jesus tells Philip that to see the Son is to see the Father. Yet the faith of Israel expresses more than once that to see God was to die – it was that overpowering an experience. After the unfolding of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, followed by the gift of the Spirit, Trinity Sunday presents us with the full picture: the unity of this person with the God we can never fully know – because, like Nicodemus, our minds aren't up to the job – unless we are born from above. If we are to approach with our minds, rather than focussing in to analyse, dissect, or seek to explain, we need to open them up, to conceive, if we can, of things beyond our conceiving. Maybe the appropriate response is simply to stand in awe.

It's apt, therefore, that our first reading relates the formative occasion when Isaiah saw the Lord of hosts in the temple. It's one of those moments of revelation in scripture when no words are adequate. Isaiah is conscious only of his own unworthiness – like Peter the fisherman, confronted in Luke's Gospel with a miraculous haul of fish. Later, on the mount of transfiguration, Peter babbles on about shelters – he didn't know what he was saying. When Job finally gets to appear before God, he wisely puts his hand over his mouth. The choice of Psalm 29 enhances the point: surrounded by the revelation of the majesty of God in the storm, those in the temple can only cry, '*Gloria*'.

Most of the time we operate as if the world were flat – like a roadmap of Norfolk. We know, however, that we live on the curved surface of a globe. But when, following Einstein, physicists talk of the curvature of space-time in an expanding universe, most of us lose touch. Trinity Sunday isn't there to leave us bewildered. Like Nicodemus, we need to allow our being to be stretched into new dimensions by the reality and glory and one-ness of God. If it achieves that it will have done its job.

Thanks be to God.

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