

God in Three Persons

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

The reading this morning is found in Matthew 28:19 - 20

Introduction

These last five verses of Matthew 28 are commonly known as “The Great Commission”, because in them Jesus “Commissions” His Apostles, sending them out into the world to make disciples of all nations. It's a passage that is very often used to encourage churches, and stir-up congregations to get out there and share the Good of News of Christ; to engage in evangelism, faith sharing and witness. And indeed, over the years I've preached many a sermon on that topic using this very passage from Matthew – but not today, because today is Trinity Sunday, and this same passage is also one of the few references in the New Testament, indeed in the whole Bible in fact, to the Trinity.

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore 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 I have commanded you.”

Interestingly the word Trinity itself doesn't actually occur in the Bible, and yet the doctrine of the Trinity has become a central one for the Christian faith. For a Church to be recognised as orthodox, it must hold to the doctrine of the Trinity. All the main stream Christian Churches across the world hold to this teaching of the Trinity - that God is three persons in one: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Collectively these Churches are referred to as the Trinitarian Churches.

So if a church doesn't hold to the doctrine of the Trinity, it places itself outside the fellowship of the World Wide Christian Church, and is regarded as a cult. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons, neither organisation believes in the Trinity and are therefore not Christians.

The Word Made Flesh

Why then is it so important that if a Church refuses to accept the doctrine of the Trinity, it is excluded from the global Christian fellowship and labelled a cult?

Well, the answer is fairly simple, actually - although the word Trinity itself doesn't appear in the Bible, the teaching certainly does. There's little doubt the NT writers believed that Jesus was God; they believed Him to be God incarnate, God made man. Perhaps this is most clearly, and famously portrayed in John's Gospel, where in chapter one, John talks about Jesus as 'the Word'...

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...”
The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:1, 14).*

In other words, Jesus wasn't just a man like Abraham or Moses, or the prophets of Old Testament – a man that God simply called into His service. Jesus was different.

This passage from John's Gospel, where Jesus is not just compared to God, but is said to be God, needed some explanation. Other passages from Scripture, such as those from Paul's letters that talk about Jesus "being in very nature of God" (Phil 2:5,6; Col 1:15-20) – also needed to be more fully explained. So the doctrine of the Incarnation (meaning 'God made man') was developed, and fairly early on in the life of the Church, the Incarnation became an essential teaching, central to what the Church believed - to the point where you had to accept that Jesus was God incarnate, before you could be baptised as a Christian.

The Holy Trinity

But this teaching wasn't without its problems. If Jesus was God Incarnate, God made flesh, who was Jesus praying to when He went to the Temple to worship? Was He praying to Himself, worshipping Himself? Well of course not – He was praying to His Father in Heaven, just as He did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It was to deal with issues like these that the doctrine of the Trinity developed. In a nutshell, it goes like this: we have God the Father in heaven – the first person of the Trinity. We have God the Son on earth, in the form of Jesus – the second person of the Trinity; and finally we have the Holy Spirit, also known as God's Spirit - the third person of the Trinity.

However, what people often believe though, is somewhat different. Many Christians believe that the Father is God, yes, but Jesus is the Son and the Holy Spirit is some kind "Star Wars" like energy force. But the Holy Spirit is also a person and is always referred to as such in the Bible

So then, to clarify: the Father is God; Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is also God. Each person of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is in very nature God. Three distinct persons, but bound together in perfect unity as One God.

The Holy Mystery

This teaching quickly became enshrined in the early Church creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, which is usually recited during the Eucharist. It was drawn up to protect the teaching of the Church, to ensure that sound doctrine was not corrupted but passed on properly from one generation to another.

Now we cannot fully understand how the Trinity is possible; how God can be three separate, distinct persons, yet also One Undivided Being. This is definitely a paradox and something we will never fully comprehend in this life. God isn't just bigger than us, He is bigger than our minds; bigger even than

our imaginations. So there will always be a deep element of mystery surrounding the nature of God – which is as it should be.

Suffice it is for us to know that the Father is God and the head of the Trinity, above the Son and the Spirit – as Jesus said, “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). But Jesus is also God, though subject to the Father’s authority. And the Holy Spirit is also God, and the third person of the Trinity and proceeds from the Father and the Son.

The Great Commission

I’d like to finish by bringing us back to the Great Commission that I mentioned at the beginning of this address. Last week, Pentecost, was the Birthday of the Church. This week, Trinity Sunday, we have the newly formed Church being Commissioned or given its job description if you like, which is to make disciples of all nations, which of course, includes our own nation.

But we don’t go out there alone, we go with the authority of the Father, to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, and we do so empowered and equipped by the Holy Spirit. And right now our nation needs good news; it needs to hear of God’s love and forgiveness; it needs to hear there is hope and that we are not alone. As Jesus said to disciples on that mountain top in Galilee: *“and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Amen.