

Trinity Sunday and the harmony of God

Sermon 30 May 2021, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton

Bible Readings:

Romans 8:12-17 (being children of God) and John 3:1-17 (Nicodemus meets Jesus and hears about being born again)

Introduction

Today in the church calendar is Trinity Sunday. It comes after Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost – three amazing events. The Trinity defines the nature of God, the one God who is also three: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It is at the same time a mystery AND beautifully simple. As John Pritchard says in some prayers for Trinity Sunday, one theologian described the Trinity as: *God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, greater than great, closer than close, more loving than love.*

How do today's Bible readings have anything to do with the Trinity? Well, the clues are mainly in the story of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus is a holy man, a friendly Pharisee who has known the Jewish Scriptures in depth for a long time. He wants to find out more about Jesus.

He recognises the close relationship of Jesus to God: *no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God (v.2).*

But he is surprised and confused when Jesus says:
no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (v.3)

It's a mystery to Nicodemus. He cannot help taking things literally: *How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? (v.4)*

Like a lot of John's Gospel, this whole story has many layers of symbolism. At this point, with our 21st century hindsight, we can plot the meaning by taking the story in reverse. We can identify Easter in that wonderful v.16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Back to v.13 and there's the Ascension of Jesus: *No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*

Back a bit further to v.8 and there's a reminder of Pentecost and also the Baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit came as a rushing wind: *...you hear the sound of (the*

wind) but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

“So, Nicodemus”, Jesus says, “Do you understand now?” Jesus helps Nicodemus to see his existence in a new way. As one preacher recently wrote, the Trinity is God above us, Jesus alongside us, the Holy Spirit inside us.

Nicodemus may have his present day counterpart in Bob Dylan who turned 80 this month. It seems that Bob Dylan has no problem saying that he became a born-again Christian as an adult. One account is that it happened dramatically at a concert one day. Bob was feeling depressed and tired of life when a fan threw a silver cross to him on to the stage. Bob Dylan changed that night and became a Christian. Another, possibly more boring, biographical account says that he changed gradually over the years. All his life in America he experienced gospel based folk and rock music. All that finally made sense to him. Somehow, both explanations work! You take your pick.

Notice that Nicodemus and Bob Dylan did not encounter Jesus in a church building. Like thousands of Jewish people, Jesus was staying in Jerusalem, in someone's house, for the Festival of the Passover. Nicodemus came to find Jesus at night, in the friend's house. Bob Dylan was on stage in a big music concert.

But we generally meet in a church, on a Sunday, with service booklets full of words. Where is the Trinity in those booklets? We have a choice. Let's take the Book of Common Prayer version that we sometimes use at the 8.30am service. In that booklet there is a special prayer for Trinity Sunday introducing Holy Communion. It uses these words:

Upon the Feast of the Trinity only.

Who art one God, one Lord; not one only Person, but three Persons in one Substance. For that which we believe of the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality...

'Person' and 'Substance' are classical words that first appeared in the early years of Christianity. They are extremely deep philosophical and theological terms that explain the very essence of God. They are familiar words for many people. However, it can be misleading to think of the word 'Persons' as in modern English.

For instance, the Cottenham church East window tells the story of the Ascension. The main character is of course Jesus. Up at the top, quite small, we see God. We

also see the Holy Spirit depicted as a dove. However, those classical theologians would probably agree with one present day spiritual writer when she says:
The Trinity is not really two men and a bird.

Yes, that's so, but we are only human. Symbols, pictures, sounds, music and objects help us to understand the big truths of Christian faith. The Cottenham church windows do tell important stories.

Bob Dylan once said: "My music is always more about feeling than thinking". When I was looking for examples of sermons on the Trinity, I came across one by a priest who likened the love of God in the Trinity to harmony in music. A single note on a musical instrument is beautiful in itself. When three single notes come together in a chord, they make a beautiful harmony. There's harmony in a trinity of sound.

Today's Bible readings are a reminder that we are all children of God, all able to live new lives in Christ. As we heard in today's first reading, Romans, ch.8 v.14: *all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.* We can all live a new life, not defined by our earthly families. We are all children of God, whatever age we are. We've got the Trinity to help: God above us, Jesus alongside us, the Holy Spirit inside us.

On Sundays, immediately after the sermon we say together the Creed. The Creed is a uniquely Christian way of understanding the nature of God and the Trinity is at the heart of the Creed. We declare our faith, in harmony with God and with each other. It prepares us to show Christian unity, love and hope to the world. It is a challenge, like the challenge Jesus put to Nicodemus to see life differently.

It's a mystery but also beautifully simple. It's a reminder of the words at the beginning of this sermon: *God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, greater than great, closer than close, more loving than love.*

Here is a new prayer for Trinity Sunday 2021 by Sam Hargreaves. It introduces the Creed and explains why we need it.

Who needs a creed?

Are we so sure now of what we believe?

Are we so certain of truths left unseen?

Alternative facts try to clog up our feeds,
and fake news is seeping in like a disease.

We are a people who need a creed.

Who needs a creed?

More than just words in a book that we read,

this story, this pattern, this truth sets us free:
Of God, the creator, the Father almighty,
and Jesus the son who died and was buried
yet rose from the dead and ascended, to leave
the gift of the Spirit for you and for me:
We are a people who need a creed.
Who needs a creed:
A church that is one and yet craves unity.
Millions are hungry for words that will feed.
Martyrs have died that this truth might succeed.
Humanity cries for the need of this creed.
We are a people who need a creed.¹

¹ This resource is provided to work alongside the song “We Believe in One God” from RESOUNDworship, as part of the Songs For Sundays project.

Prayer written by Sam Hargreaves for engageworship.

For more resources in this series visit RESOUNDworship.org and engageworship.org