

THE HOLY TRINITY

Proverbs 8. 1-4, 22-31

Romans 5. 1-5

John 16. 12-15

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Feast of the Holy Trinity is one of the oldest feasts of the church. It can be traced back to St Thomas Becket, who was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury on the Sunday after Pentecost in 1162. His first act as Archbishop was to ordain that the day of his consecration be celebrated as a new festival in honour of the Holy Trinity. The observance of Trinity Sunday then spread from Canterbury throughout the whole of western Christendom.

To explain the origin of Trinity Sunday is easy. To explain what the Trinity *means*, however, is far less easy! For one thing, the doctrine of the Trinity – the doctrine of three persons in one God, equal in divinity yet distinct in personality – is not explicitly spelt out in the Bible. Indeed, if you look for the word ‘Trinity’ in the Scriptures, you won’t find it. The references to the Trinity that we *do* find in the Bible provide us instead with a ‘vocabulary’ about the Trinity, if you like; information and teaching that must be carefully pieced together in order to attempt to fathom this divine truth which is also a mystery.

Not surprisingly, it took the early Christian Church several centuries to work out a proper doctrine of the Trinity. Before that occurred, much speculation went on and some major heresies¹ were presented as being gospel truth.

¹ The two primary heresies about the Trinity (although there are more than two) are modalism and subordinationism. The ‘modalists’ were those who said that God is one God who appears in three different roles, or modalities, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A human example of modalism is one in which a man is at once a husband to his wife, a father of his

In order to bring some resolution to this controversy, Constantine, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, called the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. That Council affirmed the equality and divinity of the three persons of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And we affirm this aspect of our faith each Sunday, when we say or sing the words of the Creed.

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit share the same substance²; they are equal, one and indivisible; and they are co-eternal. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are the full expression of the one, living and true God

It is tempting to ignore or simplify the doctrine of the Trinity and just to relate to God without thinking of him as three Persons; or to relate to the Father and the Son and even the Holy Spirit as three divine beings, forgetting to unify them. Christians have always been tempted to go for one or the other of these options, whether in theological accounts or in spiritual practice.

Yet neither will do. The creeds³ of the Church make it clear that we need to keep both the oneness and tri-unity of God in our minds and hearts; and in how we talk about God and our mutually shared relationship.

But *talking* about the Trinity only gets us so far. Today, I hope to convince you that talking about the Trinity is a world apart from *experiencing* the Trinity. Because the Trinity is the fullest expression of God, it isn't just dull, dry doctrine; it is living faith. Our God is a dynamic power, a presence bursting with energy; he is a Creator intimately

children, and exercising a specific profession: one same man, playing three different parts or 'roles'. A physical example of this is water, which can take the form of liquid, ice and steam.

The 'subordinationists', on the other hand, were those who considered that God the Father is the supreme figure, and that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to him in some way.

² In Greek, the word is 'homoousious' (of like substance), compared to 'homoiousious' (of similar substance).

³ Including the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Apostles' Creed.

involved in our everyday lives; he is a Redeemer who came into the world to save us; and he is a Sanctifier who breathes holiness into every corner of our lives. Today I would like to look at two ways (even though there are many more) in which we may experience the Trinity.

The first way in which we can experience the Trinity is in *love*. This may seem obvious to some of us, but it actually requires some explanation.

When we consider the Trinity, we realise that it is three distinct but united divine Persons, bound together in a community of love. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are a community, and they are in loving relationship with one another. Their community, unlike other human communities we may know, is based exclusively on love. As the fullest expression of God, the Trinity provides a model for communal love.

Another thing that we realise when we consider the loving community of the Trinity is that its love must be shared. The Trinity does not in fact 'need' anything, but generously searches for an object for its love. And that's where you and I come in. In a very personal and unique way, each one of us is the object of the Trinitarian love. God, who is both one and three, does not love in the abstract; God loves *us*. This is one of the miracles of the Holy Trinity of God: it exists to share God's divine love with you and me. It exists to draw us into the loving community that is shared by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and that divine community finds its deepest expression when that love is shared and when it moves outside of itself.

Now you may have already understood this, but when we begin to think about this love that exists within the Trinity and which is shared with us, we see that it is given

completely and totally; and more than that, as it is given, it both affirms and creates identity. On one hand, as the love of the Trinity gives itself, it affirms the identity of the Trinity, because God is love *in his own being*. On the other hand, as the love of the Trinity gives itself to us, *we find our own, true identity*. As we are caught up in the outpouring of God's Trinitarian love, we discover who we really are and who we were meant to be. It is only in accepting and receiving the overflowing love of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – that we will discover our true selves.

The second way in which we can experience the Trinity is to take part in its *life*. We have already seen that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are bound together in a community of love; and in the loving community that they share, they are in *relationship* one to another. At the very heart of this Trinitarian relationship, there is abundant and divine *life*.

Years ago, as far back as the 8th century, the Church Fathers were reflecting on the relationship that is shared by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. And they found a word to describe it: it is a Greek word (*perichoresis*) that can be translated as co-inherence. Put simply, co-inherence means that each person of the Trinity participates in the life and the actions of the other. In their shared relationship, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit interact with one another and complement the work that each has to do.

We see this, do we not, in the account of creation in Genesis, when all of the members of the Trinity were present as the world and humankind are made;⁴ we see this in the biblical account of salvation, where Jesus was not the only actor; but God was in him,

⁴ Cf. Gen 1. 1-2; 1. 26.

reconciling the world to himself,⁵ and pouring out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.⁶ And we see this in the sustaining, empowering and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the Church of God, which is equally the work of the Father and the Son.

Literally, the word *perichoresis* means ‘dancing in a circle’; and from this we can see that as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit relate to each other, it is as if they are caught up in a heavenly dance, weaving in and out of each other in a blissful, dynamic circle. And as the Trinity reaches out to us in love, it also invites you and me to enter into their shared relationship. The Trinity invites us, as it were, to enter into its sacred dance.⁷

As lofty and mysterious as this relationship of the members of the Trinity might appear to be, I actually find that the image of a sacred dance representing their shared life together to be helpful. It leads me to ask myself, as I ask you this morning, ‘to what extent am I *in step or harmony* with the sacred dance of the Triune God?’ ‘Am I dancing to my own rhythm?’ ‘Who, literally, is in charge of my life?’ The sacred dance of God is one that calls us to join in with him and to experience the *shared life* of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the fullest.

Amen.

⁵ Cf. 2 Cor 5. 19.

⁶ Cf. Rom 5. 5.

⁷ This sacred dance is one that surely reflects the sacred dance of creation before the Fall, when all of God’s created order was perfectly in step with the divine.