

Trinity C St Stephen's 9.30 & 11 john 16: 12-15
12.6.22

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

Did you see the film: “Nuns on the Run”? It had the following conversation in it, when Robbie Coltrane tried to explain to an unchurched Eric Idle the meaning of the Trinity:

Robbie: Here's the pitch. You've got the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The three are one, like a shamrock, my old priest used to say. Three leaves, but one leaf. Now, the Father sent the Son, who was love, and when he went away, he sent the Holy Spirit, who came down from a

Eric: You've told me already, a ghost.

Robbie: No, a dove.

Eric: The dove was a ghost?

Robbie: No! The ghost was a dove.

Eric: Let me try and summarise this. God sent his Son and his Son is God, but the Son moonlights as a Holy Ghost, a Holy Spirit and a dove and they all sent each other, even though they are all one and the same thing.

Robbie: You've got it. You really could be a nun.

Eric: Wait a minute. What I said – does that make sense to you?

Robbie: Oh no! but it makes no sense to anybody. That's why you have to believe it. That's why you have to have faith. If it makes sense it wouldn't have to be a religion, would it?

I hoped that's all clear. No? well how about one official explanation set out in the Athanasian Creed, which you can find in the BCP.

“Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.

Which Faith, except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible

I'm tempted to say: The whole thing incomprehensible!

It's not so surprising that Lambeth Borough Council in London made a glaring mistake. It sent three Council Tax demands to the church of St John the Divine in Brixton, one for God the Father, one for the Son and one for the Holy Ghost, each one for £521, which, if not paid,

would lead to a court appearance. When this error was pointed out there were red faces at Lambeth.

I remember when I was at College, taking my sermon which I was to preach the following Sunday at a local parish, to the Vice Principal. When, later, he handed it back to me he said: "Of course, it heretical; but I've never read one that wasn't, so go and preach it," to my great relief.

When you turn to the Bible, you will not see the doctrine of the Trinity set out in so many words, though the ending of St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (13; 14) summarises the essence of the teaching.: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

This teaching regarding the nature of God came out of the early years' experience of God at work in the life of the Church, and the experience of the disciples as they shared in Jesus' ministry. They tried to put this experience into words, but words are quite inadequate to capture the essence and being of God.

We should never forget that the Jews, unlike the nations around them, believed firmly that there was one God alone, the creator of all things, who was to be worshipped and honoured above all things, a belief shared by the early Church and Islam. Yet it was those early Christian who came to realise that in Jesus, they had met with God incarnate; and in the coming of the Holy Spirit, the same God was with them, but experienced in a different form. This new understanding was a radical step of faith, which still baffles Islam.

In Isaiah, the prophet says: "Be strong, fear not; Your God comes to save you with his vengeance & his retribution. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened; the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame will leap like a deer and the dumb shout out aloud; for water will spring up in the wilderness and torrents flow in the desert." (Isa 35: 4-6). These are the signs of the inbreaking of God's love, as shown in the life of Christ, and was Jesus' answer to John the Baptist when he asked: "Are you the Messiah?"

In St John's gospel, Jesus prays to the Father: "that the (disciples) may be one, as we are one. (Jn 17: 11) Throughout the closing chapters of John's gospel, we see Jesus becoming more and more identified with his heavenly Father.

As he was preparing the disciples for what was to come, Jesus also gives them reassurance that he will be with them even though his earthly time comes to an end In ch 16, Jesus says that he is going away to him who sent him. "Nevertheless I assure you it is in your interest that I am leaving you. If I do not go, the Advocate will not come, whereas, if I go, I will send him to you (v7). "He will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but will speak only what he hears, and he will make known to you what is to come and make it know to you He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and make it known to you." (v13)

As you read the NT you can't help being struck by the unity between Father & Son. The purpose of God reaching out to us through Jesus, the embodiment of love, is to draw us

into his kingdom, back into relationship with him. In Jesus we see what a human life should be like. As an early Father of the Church said: "God became human so that humanity might become divine," and achieves this through the gift to us of his Holy Spirit at work in our hearts.

As St Augustine said: "The names we use to distinguish between the different persons of the Trinity refer to the relationship of the persons to each other, not to their common substance of nature – which is one."

Or as John Wesley asked: "Tell me, how is it that in this room there are three candles but one light, and I will explain to you the mode of divine existence."

On a lighter note:" A man walked into a restaurant and the waiter asked him "Who will be dining with you tonight? The man replied: "My sister's brother, my wife's husband and my son's father." The waiter showed him to a table for one.