

Mystery and intimacy

A sermon preached by the Rev Charles Draper on Trinity Sunday, 22 May 2016 in St Peter's Wolvercote

For me there are two things that are really important about the Trinity, its mystery and intimacy - two things that appear to be opposites, but which I believe actually fit together.

The first really important thing about the Trinity is that we don't understand it. If you think you've understood the Trinity – you're doing better than me! I believe we are encountering something that is beyond our understanding because this is about God – God who is so far beyond our understanding.

Put it this way. Do we believe in one God, or three? One of course – and yet it's not quite that simple. Are we with the Jews and Muslims in believing in one God, without compromise, or are we with Hinduism, believing there is plurality in God? Irritatingly, Christians just won't make that choice. We want to have our cake and eat it. One God – absolutely, without question. In three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sorry, was that one God? No wonder other religions find it hard to understand us!

Or put it in terms of logic. I'm not an expert on mathematical logic, but let me try this. If $a = b$, but b does not $= c$, then a cannot $= c$. Am I right? Now let's make some classical statements about the Trinity. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. So mathematical logic flies out of the window. Of course this isn't surprising because we're talking about a God who is far beyond the constraints of mathematical logic.

So where is this leading? It is leading us to something simple but very important which is that God is mystery, God is beyond our understanding and far beyond any simple explanations or definitions. God is transcendent, literally transcending, surpassing, all our human language, logic and understanding.

God is mystery. God beyond our understanding, God beyond our imagining. That's why we used incense today rather than last Sunday at Pentecost. Not because Trinity Sunday is greater than Pentecost, but because it's Trinity Sunday that has that sense of mystery and transcendence which the use of incense conveys.

For me it is very important to have that sense of God as mystery – beyond my understanding. It means we need to have a healthy humility – humility in our prayer, humility in our theology, humility in our doctrinal and ethical statements. We are entitled to hold convictions, and it's good to do so, but it's also good to remember – we don't know the answers.

And I want you to know that though I may at times preach passionately, I never claim infallibility. In the end I don't know the answers, I simply have to trust in the mystery who is God.

I find this helps me, not only in facing difficult ideas like the doctrine of the Trinity, but also in facing the many challenges to faith that our world throws up, for example the challenges of science. I'm not talking about evolution – I would hope most of us have moved beyond those arguments. For me it's the areas where science is delving into the mind, exploring psychology and neuroscience, seeking to understand why we think and feel and believe the things we do – delving into areas that used to be the preserve of faith and theology.

In these and so many other areas where life is confusing and perplexing, and we're not sure where faith and belief fit in, then for me it is the understanding of God as mystery that helps – believing we can find God there in these areas too.

At the end of the Book of Job, Job is confronted with a God who is beyond his understanding and all explanations. Yet strangely that helps him. He knows that simple answers won't do, but finds himself content with a God who is beyond understanding and beyond all simple explanations. He realises this is a God he can still trust.

So there are no logical watertight explanations of the Trinity. Of course there are many pictures which do not claim to explain the Trinity but which can help us to grasp something of what this is about. We probably each have our own favourites. Mine is to think of the sun (s-u-n) shining in the sky, giving out light and heat. We can see the sun up there in the sky, dazzling bright, pouring out energy – God the Father, source of all. We can see the sunlight all around us, on the grass, on the trees, revealing the sun to us, giving us light to live by – God the Son, Light of the world, who reveals the Father to us. And we can feel the warmth of the sun shining on our faces, warming our backs – God the Holy Spirit who touches our lives and warms our hearts. The Sun, the sunlight, the warmth of the sun – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is only a picture of course, not an explanation, but what I like is that it shows that the Trinity is not about God far away, removed from us, but about God who reaches out to touch us.

And this leads me to my second point that the Trinity is not only about the mystery of God but also, strangely, about the intimacy of God with us.

Here we have to remember once again where all this started. This is all about Jesus, born as a human child, who, as the prayer says, "lived on earth and went about among us"; Jesus who called us his brothers and sisters and who encouraged us to speak to God as Father exactly as he did, in effect, sharing with us his own intimate relationship with the Father. This is about the Holy Spirit, who has come to live inside us, who, as Jesus says, is like living water flowing out from the innermost part of our being.

God beside us, God with us, God alongside us. God within us, God in our hearts, God in our innermost being. God the Trinity is God reaching out and touching us, God enfolding us in his own being – God's intimate embrace.

God is Trinity, because God is not a distant being who remains distinct and separate from us. God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a God who welcomes and enfolds us in his own life and being. God who is closer to us than any other person, God closer to us even than we are to ourselves.

So the Trinity is the intimacy of God with us. Intimacy and mystery? Are these not opposites? Logically, maybe. But I think we know in our human relationships that the closer you are to another human being, the more there is a sense of mystery about them as well. Many of the great men and women of prayer have said the same about God. The deeper they have travelled in prayer the more they have found both a deeper sense of mystery but also a deep and profound intimacy.

In a free translation of Psalm 55 it says: *"Your arms are wide and welcoming, In your presence we are relaxed, And feel most strangely at home."*

So the Trinity is not something for us to try to get our heads around, to define or to explain. Far better to acknowledge God as mystery, and approach in humble worship. But ultimately the Trinity is God reaching out to touch us, the intimacy of God with us, welcoming us and enfolding us into his own life and being.