

Reflections on the Holy Trinity

A sermon preached by the Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote on Trinity Sunday, 15 June 2014

Isaiah 40.12-31, 2 Corinthians 13.11-13, Matthew 28.16-20

There are various ways of reflecting on the Holy Trinity, two in particular, perhaps. One of these is to consider the 'inner workings' of the Trinity ... to try to understand how the Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other within themselves. This is called the 'ONTOLOGICAL (or essential or immanent)' Trinity – 'the relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit to each other without reference to God's relationship with creation'. (This is just to prove I was listening during my ordination training). This aspect can produce rather simplistic pictures – perhaps likening the Trinity to a clover leaf, 3 parts and yet one whole. It can also produce very complicated doctrines and definitions:- HYPOSTASES ... 3 persons, distinct yet one in essence and substance; THE SOCIAL TRINITY – 3 persons only by virtue of their RELATIONSHIP with each other; PERICHORESIS ... the 'weaving together of the three persons' in an eternal 'dance' in which they enter into each other, permeate each other, and dwell in each other.

The feeling that one *had* to preach about this aspect of the Trinity has caused many preachers to sigh with horror when they have found out they were preaching on Trinity Sunday, but I feel no such pressure, and am comforted by Isaiah's words of warning about trying to 'fathom' God. Isaiah says God's understanding is unsearchable, how can we compare him to anything we know? And one of my favourite passages of the Bible - the last chapters of the book of Job - contain God's wonderful challenge to those of us arrogant enough to suggest that we can 'know God', understand how he works! I realise, of course, that 'curiosity' is a deeply human instinct, and so I understand the drive for people to devote time and energy to this aspect of God, but I feel no such need.

Isaiah reminds us that this unsearchable, transcendent God has not isolated himself from his creation. ..

he 'gives power to the faint' - he strengthens the powerless. These verses show that God is deeply involved with us in a very personal way. He instigates a relationship with each one of us as an individual, and in his own 'person'. This 'relationship with his creation' is the second way of thinking about the Trinity. This is called the 'ECONOMIC' Trinity - the way in which the Trinity operates within history, within our lives. It's this aspect that I'm reflecting on for a few minutes..

I'm sure that all of us here do 'know' God in our lives, perhaps through some direct experience, or through reading, worship etc. And I believe we can indeed think of God in three ways:

- as CREATOR - Father, the one who created the universe, and who continues to create
- as INCARNATE – taking human form – Jesus, God's Son
- as SUSTAINER – energiser – Spirit.

I believe we can experience God as Creator quite directly – in those moments when we are out in creation and are simply taken out of ourselves in wonder, or when we hear a particular

piece of music, or particular words – a poem, a wonderful piece of prose - or when we hold a baby in our arms. The fact that scientists today seem to be finding more proof for the ‘Big Bang’ isn’t a problem for those of us who believe in God. ‘Knowledge’ doesn’t replace God – it makes him, and his creation, more and more amazing. And it’s interesting that the latest discoveries in physics only seem to throw up more and more things to discover. This would be no surprise to Isaiah!

God created human beings – as a result, we now believe, of an evolutionary process – one of many processes that are part of God’s creation. According to the Old Testament, God tried very hard to keep human beings on a ‘good’ track. He made and remade covenants with his people in spite of their apparent determination to do their own thing – a wayward lot they were – and we still are. So, in an attempt to bring his created beings back to himself he became INCARNATE. God took on flesh and blood in Jesus Christ, and so God the Creator is ‘Father’ because of his relationship with his Son, and Jesus is God the Son because of his relationship with the Father. But we are told that this relationship did not suddenly begin on December 25th year 0! St John understood something very profound – that Jesus was the incarnation of something that had been ‘*in the beginning, the Word, the Logos*’. So, in some mystical, divine way, Jesus Christ was always ‘in the Father’, but was present in flesh and blood for just a few years.

In those few years, Jesus changed our relationship with God. He taught us a new way of living and loving, and so he was our example. Jesus suffered and was crucified out of love for us, but he overcame death, rising again, and he overcame the evil that had crucified him. So Jesus changed the power that suffering and death has in our lives, he became our Saviour, our redeemer. He also opened up a completely new way for us to be in relationship with God the Creator because now we come to God the Father *through Jesus Christ*, especially when we want to ask God for something and when we want God to forgive us. Jesus showed us the way to forgiveness because, although Jesus did not sin, he did know temptation, and throughout his ministry he made it extremely clear that he had a very special mission to those who felt themselves to be sinners. Time and again Jesus taught us how much God longs for us to always turn to him, whatever we have done, however imperfect we feel. God always welcomes us with open arms, just as Christ welcomed sinners, those who needed healing in spirit as well as in the body.

Jesus taught us, even *commanded* us, to pray to the Father through him – and he is a very special mediator because he has experienced what it is like to be human, with its imperfections, vulnerabilities. So we come close to God through Jesus in prayer, and many people feel very close to Jesus when they are suffering, because of Jesus’ suffering.

So Jesus Christ is God incarnate, Son of God the Father, he is mediator, saviour, example, and he promised to be with us always. And then there’s the Holy Spirit.

He or she also seems to have been around since the beginning and crops up all over the place. Right at the beginning of the Bible – of creation - when the earth was dark and void the Spirit brooded over the waters. Jesus Christ was conceived in Mary, we’re told, by the Holy Spirit. And then, at Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on him. We’re told that, on the cross, Jesus ‘gave up the Spirit’ ... ‘into your hands, Lord, I commend my

Spirit'. But he promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and we celebrated this gift at Pentecost. Jesus instructed the disciples to baptise people by water and the Spirit, and in Baptism we mark the gift of the Holy Spirit in a very particular way. But we frequently recognise the working of the Spirit in the lives of those who have not been baptised, just as we recognise it in our own lives. We may feel 'inspired', or see others as 'inspired', and the Spirit sometimes comes like those tongues of flame, and rushing wind ... in some deep 'spiritual' experience – or it can come gently – as a breath – as Jesus 'breathed' the Spirit on his disciples.

So THE SPIRIT seems to be in everything ...it seems to somehow be the 'energy' that carried out, and continues to carry out, the work of God the Creator and that sustains his creation. And we associate the Spirit with LOVE...'Come Holy Spirit and kindle in us the fire of your love'. And it is in this love, surely, that we can recognise the 'one-ness' of God. It was out of love that God created us, and continues to create. It was out of love that he became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and it was for love that Jesus was prepared to be crucified, to redeem us. And whatever the Spirit does is love in essence. Our experience of God, then, as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, will be an experience of love.... and this love can colour and underlie everything in our lives.

I don't, then, offer any 'doctrines' of the Trinity ... I echo Isaiah's words that God is simply unsearchable, no one can know how the Trinity works within itself. But I also rejoice, with Isaiah, that we do know God in our lives because he chooses to enter into personal relationship with us. I give thanks that God makes him(or her) self known to me In his creation – in that natural world that I take so much delight in, in new life, in the creativity of poets, writers, musicians, artists. I give thanks that, in Jesus Christ, God opens up for me a way of approaching him in all my vulnerability, weakness, sinfulness, fear. He provides a mediator when I want to ask for help, for myself or for those I'm worried about, and he assures me of forgiveness when I ask for it. I give thanks that, day after day after day the Holy Spirit strengthens me and all who open themselves to that Spirit, and fills me over and over again with the certainty of God's love – an infinite, boundless love, but that becomes personal. A love that initiates and sustains a personal relationship with God – whoever, or whatever, God is.