

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 27 May 2018

## *Trinity Sunday 2018*

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Words from the first reading:

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord: "whom shall I send, who will go for us"? And I said "here am I, send me". (Isaiah 6)*

Here we are on Trinity Sunday - the celebration of the glorious and undivided Trinity, God who is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.. Trinity is the culmination of the great events of our Christian faith from incarnation to Pentecost which we celebrated last weekend.

Vicarages and Parsonages have had their most nerve-wracking week of the year, for as sermon must be prepared on the doctrine of the Trinity. What shall be said? The priest is not quite him or herself.

I've a confession... When I was a training incumbent, it always felt somehow appropriate that the curate should do that - good for their ministerial development and priestly formation - or the Reader or Non Stipendiary clergy for their voice too needed to be heard on this important subject. So the Canon Precentor isn't quite feeling himself as the dial points here today - it's been some years since I preached on the Trinity.

Did you know this, which popped into my inbox this week? That Amazon's voice-controlled assistant, which answers to the name 'Alexa', has hitherto been used to answering questions about the weather or upcoming calendar appointments. But from now on *Alexa* will be able to field deeper questions. For this week the Church of England launched an app for the *Alexa* platform which allows users to pose 'metaphysical questions' to the speaker on their kitchen counter. The app can find the nearest place of worship and explain how a wedding service works, and recite the Ten Commandments.

Well we haven't got any of those gimmicks at the Precentory, so I typed into the portal online "Holy Trinity". I'm afraid it told me what I already knew: that the discussions and heated controversy which led to the doctrine's formulation go back to the third and fourth centuries.

What *Alexa* didn't tell me was that the idea of dedicating a Sunday to the Holy Trinity only comes in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century. And only in England did it catch on so well that all the following Sundays were labelled 'Sundays after Trinity' – lasting the great expanse of months until Advent.

None of which matters very much and will not do in a sermon – for it leaves the soul unfed, and our minds filled with stuff which is probably only really of use in a pub quiz.

So let's start again.

The idea of the Trinity might be puzzling.

BUT it is probably **the** most important idea to help us in our journey of faith. The 'golden key' to our Christian faith is to see every teaching about our faith in the light of the Trinity. The Trinity is the golden key because it unlocks your mind from all the boring, factual stuff about definitions and doctrines and rituals – and puts your mind on a different, poetic, plain. The Trinity unlocks your mind to the mystery and awe and creativity and wonder that is God.

In the Hellenistic era of Greek philosophy before Christ, religion and poetry were largely the same thing. People didn't presume to be able to define 'God' or the mystery that is beyond and above. They looked for words that could describe mystery: and poetry doesn't claim to be a perfect description of anything (as dogma and churchy rules and instructions so often foolishly do). It is a "hint half guessed" (TS Eliot's phrase in *Four Quartets*).

That's why the poetry of the language of Trinity entices you into being a searcher for the mystery we call God for yourself. It creates the heart-leap, inspiring you to go further, deeper. I still recall as a child climbing Ben Nevis – and (mistakenly) thinking I could see, not far up ahead, the summit; and getting there only to see that in fact further on was the summit; but getting to *that* spot and seeing that the path was still onwards and upwards... and so on – being enticed further, upwards. Poetry speaks in metaphors.

Which is why I like the Hellenistic idea that poetry and religion are one and the same. Surely all religious language is by its nature metaphor – something you have to remind those who want to understand the Bible in a literal way. Religion – the word itself is metaphor – it is from the Latin, meaning to bind together/draw together: in other words 'Religion' is about bringing us together in relationship with the world around you, with the people of the world around you, and with God. So 'religion' points towards a mystery that you don't know – cannot know – until you have experienced it. When religion becomes just definitions, philosophy, moralisms, ritual, it will no longer be able to transform.

Magdalen Smith says that the language we use in church is asked to be different from the language and speech of everyday, distinctive and nudging us into the numinous. "Through its metaphor and imagery, beauty and poetry, such language needs the capacity to take us to a different level of existence". The language of worship and faith "enables us to step through the veil of the ordinary and into the mystery and grace of the person that God is. Like music, liturgy inspires us to dance rather than plod" <sup>1</sup>.

So I want you to take away two things today about Trinity: the first is what I've been speaking of. That the language of Trinity reminds us that there is never one, and only one, way of defining the divine. No 'catch-all' dogma that we can come up with will ever say all that can be said. The reality of God, described as three persons, is always richer more powerful, more dynamic, mysterious and alive than our

fumbling words can tell. Far from creating another 'dead dogma', the doctrine of the Trinity always reminds us of that. So that's the first thing: that God reveals him/herself as creator God, loving Son, fire of the Spirit, challenging and opening our hearts to the mystery of God's presence with and in us. God beyond our understanding.

Second, the idea of Trinity tells us that **you** are included in that Trinity of Love, whoever you are: that God isn't some lonely, static, cosmic 'unmoved mover'.

Rather God is the God of relationships. You will be able to picture perhaps Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity (in fact hospitality at the oaks of Mamre in the Old Testament). Each figure is gazing lovingly at the next. It portrays that "at the heart of the universe is divine communion"<sup>2</sup>.

Communion is what we most need and seek with God and each other. And Christians affirm that God is love (not just that "God loves"). That's why *any* form of prejudice – race, lifestyle, beliefs, gender – can never make sense in the light of our faith. That's why all our political decisions, the way we vote – our views on the Brexit pantomime, Mr Trump's wall or trade barriers or any other issue – should be seen in the light of the golden key – the light of the language of the Trinity of Love.

Trinity – Relationship – Love – means that it makes no sense to believe in a God who refuses to relate to people who we consider to be impure or irreligious. It makes no sense that a God who is loving relationship rejects those of other faiths or none who express that love in their lives. It makes no

sense that this Trinitarian God has no room for those who express their love in same-sex relationships. When we think of those mind-sets or cultures where women are subjugated as less than equal, it makes no sense that our Trinitarian God of Love might refuse to be represented by half the human race on account of the fact that they happen to be female.

This Love, of the God of Love, is the most searing and searching: "Trinity teaches us that what matters is tenderness, justice, openness to the wisdom of others, integrity and honesty and commitment"<sup>3</sup>. If we make God adopt our standards of judging others, we will reduce him/her from mystery and awe of Trinity to something much lesser of our own creation.

So, first, Trinity helps us with our image of God – the God beyond words and descriptions.

And, second, Trinity helps us understand God's desire for us to mirror a relationship of love – desires us to recognise that we are inescapably, in relationship with the world and its peoples.

The mystery of Trinity is that, in Jesus, God expresses in human flesh his love of the creation he has made (incarnation); and in Spirit (Pentecost last week) God enters us and empowers us – you and me – to bring that love into the world. It's too much to take in – but at every moment the whole reality of God touches our world through you and me and his creation.

No wonder the name of the Trinity – Father Son and Holy Spirit – is invoked at baptism and blessing and all our worship. From beginning to end and from end to beginning God has been, is, and always will be  
    creating as Father,  
    nurturing as Son,  
    touching and inspiring as Spirit.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord: “whom shall I send, who will go for us”? And I said “here am I, send me”. (Isaiah 6)*

A good place to end a sermon – as you and I are sent out to tell others, with our lives of tenderness, openness and justice, of our God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Rejoice in the Trinity – the great simplicity of the mystery which describes the indescribable wonder of God, and which offers us a foretaste of heaven.

Philip Banks, May 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Magdalen Smith: *Unearthly Beauty*, SPCK

<sup>2</sup> Tony Castle: *Gateway to the Trinity, meditations on Rublev’s Icon*, St Paul Press

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare & Rayment-Pickard: *The Inclusive God*, Canterbury Press