

Trinity Sunday - 07/06/2020

Exodus 34:1-8; Song of 3YM; 2 Corinthians 13:11-14; Matthew 28.16-20

Sermon by Rev'd Stephen Monsiegnur

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,'

Being Christian we are charged as individuals and as the body of Christ, the Church', to take forward the mission of God. Becoming Christian occurs through a baptism where there declaration to God is made in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A reference that for many is confusing. Christians believe that there is only one God who is encountered as God the Father, and beyond human understanding, God the Son who lived not just among us but fully human as one of us tempted and with freedom to choose, and God the Holy Spirit who remains active in our lives ensuring that unbreakable covenant, a source of strength and hope. This understanding has seen Christians accused by other faiths including those of the shared Abrahamic origin, of believing in three Gods rather than one, at best not knowing God or worse disregarding God. Such accusations are wrong.

It is this concept of God as triune that is recalled by Christians and recommitted too every time we recite our creed, gather to share in Christ meal; But what do we mean when we say "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty ...and in one Lord Jesus Christ... in the Holy Spirit". Who or what is God?

St Augustine of Hippo spent almost three decades dealing with this question, in the process writing some fifteen volumes called "About the Trinity". Given the regularity at which Augustine was revising and updating his work, we could question whether he ever reached a satisfactory conclusion. This is important for us to consider as we, particularly on Trinity Sunday, continue to explore the same question ourselves in our effort to understand the mission.

The fact that Augustine and many many other great theologians have and continue to struggle with the question of God's triune nature suggest that it may be a question to which there is no concrete answer. If we consider the burning bush, the voice from a cloud, the man Jesus, and the Spirit we are only getting glimpses of the full sense of God. In attempting to define let alone understand the doctrine of the Trinity we are in short trying to know the unbounded immensity of God.

I am drawn to a passage in the book 'Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy'. Not regarded as a theological text by any means there is a passage that in referring to the mystery of God highlights the significance of faith in the human-God relationship. If we know absolutely all there is to know about God then we are at least equal too God probable able to exceed God and so God becomes irrelevant. God ceases to exist. The point is that we as human cannot ever fully know God's nature and so faith is crucial. God remains a mystery.

There is a story that Augustine struggling with this issue took a walk on the beach, during which he saw a young boy digging a hole in the sand with a seashell. He watched as the boy ran to the ocean, filled the shell, and rushed back to pour the seawater into the hole he had previously made.

Augustine asked the young boy what he was doing, to which the child replied, "I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole". It was then that Augustine realised that this was precisely was he was trying to do . . . to fit the great mysteries of God into his human mind.

It is easy to say God is beyond human understanding, but I feel that in the recitation of our credal belief we are obliged to make some effort in explaining God to those who are yet to understand. To this end, and I stress to the best of my human reasoning, I will use the analogy of an egg to explain the nature of Trinity as applicable to concept of God as "Three in One".

An egg has three parts to it: The Shell – the Albumin (also known as the White) – the Yolk. Now if you imagine the shell, the albumin and the yolk separated and placed on individual plates would you call each an egg? I suspect not.

You might respond by saying the egg is made up of all three parts – simply separating the parts does not give you three separate eggs. Rather you have distinguished the parts that are the SUBSTANCE of the Egg. In other words, you still collectively only have the same one egg that you started with.

But what if I removed one part say the yolk from the picture. Would I still have egg?

In cooking terminology is important in recipes. If I were making pavlova, I would refer to the egg white rather than the whole egg as the essential part for the process. You are not using the whole egg, but the egg is involved. You could think of it as the egg being incomplete without one of these elements – yet you would call all of them egg.

So it is with the Trinity.

The Godhead is one – just as a complete egg is one

Yet the Godhead is made up of three substances we refer to as persons; The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit. Yes, Christians do believe in One God, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. As I have suggested, if we separate the shell from the white and the white from the yolk of the egg – the egg wouldn't now become three eggs - would it? It would still be one egg! In the same way, there is still only One God when we perceive or recognise the three persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, the word 'Trinity' is never mentioned in scripture however, there are references to the triune nature such as verse 14 in the 2 Corinthians reading, the Gospel reading from Matthew.

In John's Gospel we find much chapter's 14 and 15 illustrate Jesus in conversation with the disciples detailing the triune nature of God "...Anyone who has seen me (Jesus) has seen the Father...Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me..." (John 14:9) and "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:26)

When we consider the difficulty, the church has faced due to its doctrine on the Trinity, the schism between it and the other Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Islam we can reasonably ask why is it important for Christians to believe in the Trinity. The answer is simply because salvation hangs on the fact that Jesus is fully God as well as being fully human.

Since the foundation of the Church there have been three basic propositions about the nature of Jesus:

First, that Jesus was fully human, but not God.

This was a heresy championed by the Ebionites. This doctrine sounds attractive but contradicts many passages especially in John's Gospel which emphasize the deity of Jesus. Two examples are John 1:1-14 where Jesus is identified as the Word and as the Word is God so must Jesus be, and John 20:28, where Thomas meeting the risen Lord falls on his knees saying, "My Lord and my God" is not rebuked by Jesus.

Second, that Jesus was fully God, but not really human.

Also a heresy championed by the Docetics who taught that Jesus was truly God in the flesh, but not really a human being. He only “seemed” to be a man. The Docetics’ position contradicted passages like Hebrews 4:15 and 1 John 1:1-3, which emphasize the humanity of Jesus.

Thirdly, that Jesus was both fully human and fully God.

This is the orthodox position of the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and Athanasius Creeds. Creeds to which the Anglican Church affirms. In 451 AD the Council of Chalcedon declared:

“...we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood.... This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union...”

So why is Jesus’ humanity and his divinity so important?

Firstly, St. Paul tells us that only a sinless person could die as a substitute for humanity’s sins.

All mere humans have sinned, and if Jesus was merely human then he would have been born into sin. So instead of dying for our sins, he would have died for his own sins. (see Rom 3:23) The divine nature of Jesus by virtue of his conception secures his sinlessness.

Secondly, If Jesus had not been human, he could not have lived a perfect human life. It was this living of a perfect human life - that was necessary for him to take the penalty of our sin. Jesus as human had to not only experience human life he had to also choose to experience it freely. Anything otherwise would make him not fully human and in essence give him an advantage not open to humanity. Consider Romans 5:17-18 where Paul declares Christ’s humanity is important because if Christ had not been human, he could not have freed us from the slavery of death. Or Hebrews 2:14-15 “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity, so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death- that is the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death”

As Christians we are called not just to follow the teachings of Jesus, but importantly to know Jesus the Christ, to know the meaning of his suffering, death and resurrection for our lives both now and in time to come. In declaring our faith through the creed we are declaring our belief in one triune God, The Father, beyond human understanding, God the Son who lived not just among us but fully as one of us tempted and with freedom to choose, and God the Holy Spirit who remains active in our lives ensuring that unbreakable covenant, a source of strength and hope.

To believe something else is to simply not be Christian.