

It's perhaps as well to admit that Trinity Sunday is not the easiest on which to preach. The Trinity is the most difficult of doctrines, and it seems to have the least bearing on how we live the Christian life. Katherine Sonderreger is a leading Anglican theologian in the USA and she has recently written a hefty volume on the Trinity. She writes this: 'No one seeks to preach on Trinity Sunday... to the curate, the visiting pastor, the (seminary professor) falls this unwanted duty... Trinity is technical and no one is the wiser when the sermon limps to the end.' We theologians always run the risk of getting too excited about speculative ideas on the inner workings of the Godhead, failing to understand that these are often met with incomprehension or scepticism when delivered from the pulpit. They don't land well; indeed, to that extent the people of God may have something important to teach us.

And yet the Trinity is deeply embedded in the faith of the church, in our hymns and prayers, in the formula we use at baptism, and in the language of blessing by which we are dismissed each Sunday. The threefold name of Father, Son and Spirit is invoked and repeated, often with the sign of the cross. Liturgically, this is second nature but we find it hard to explain.

I recently met a pastor at a conference in the USA. He told me that he had worked for many years in Jordan, a country that has much been in the news these past days. In that setting he noted how difficult Christian people found explaining the doctrine of the Trinity to their Muslim neighbours who accused them of believing in three Gods not one, and therefore of lapsing in polytheism. So there's a challenge for us today.

The best way of explaining the doctrine of the Trinity to students is to point out that it has always had to steer a midcourse between two more radical alternatives that lie on either side. The first is tritheism, the view that there is not one but three gods. No one in the church has ever advanced this view. The oneness of God is affirmed by the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus. The second heretical option is that the distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit are no more than an actor playing three successive roles on the stage, or wearing three different masks. These are temporary parts that God plays but behind them we know nothing at all about God. This view is sometimes called modalism and was rejected. I can see already a glazed expression coming over your eyes.

This year much attention has been devoted to the Nicene Creed, which is the most widely accepted expression of the Trinity across the churches. A powerful symbol of ecumenical unity, the Creed is acknowledged by Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians across the world. It has proved surprisingly durable over seventeen centuries. The original version of the creed was agreed in 325, though the one we use today is the expanded version agreed at Constantinople in 381. As a random experiment, I've been asking people what they're thinking about when they recite the

creed. Some of the answers have been surprising, including those from clergy colleagues which I won't repeat. But do feel free to tell me more at coffee this morning.

Here are three points that may help us to make some sense of the Trinity followed by a practical suggestion.

1. The Trinity is about the oneness of God and the unity of God's actions. The word 'one' appears at key moments in the creed. There is one God and one Lord. And since the Holy Spirit is referred to in the definite article, there must be only one Spirit. We share with Jews a conviction about the oneness of God. And this one God has a unity of purpose from creation to the end of time. The creed has a comprehensive scope. Everything must be included in this overarching history, all things seen and unseen from the beginning of time to all eternity. This must have some practical force for us. Our lives are set within this higher purpose, the immense drama of creation and redemption. We are upheld and ordered by the one creator God, the one Lord Jesus, and the one Spirit. This can give us some confidence for the business of living, knowing that these are our coordinates and that they are secured by our faith.

2. A second point. God is most fully expressed in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Christian faith makes no sense without constant reference to the Word and the Spirit. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons around the year 200, spoke of these as *the two hands of God*. These are the means by which God the Creator works within the world. God has been revealed in the story of Jesus in a way that surpasses all others – that's why there is a fourfold gospel at the centre of Scripture. We return to this constantly in our weekly worship and in our private devotions. This does not preclude God speaking to us through other historical figures – prophets, apostles, saints, and the great teachers of other faiths. But our practice does assume a commitment to the life of Jesus as a focal point for faith, a standard by which everything else is to be judged. The NT reflects on this in different ways – one name above all other names, one Lord above all other lords. There is one God the Father, and one Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian calendar reflects this, as it moves from Advent to Easter.

There's also the Spirit, that elusive force which constantly surprised the church in new and exciting ways. The final version of the creed which we use today added a section on the Spirit that was missing in 325. The faith of the church is not limited to one historical moment, nor is God the Creator confined to the far side of the universe. There is a Spirit amongst us, here and now, indwelling the world, and making Christ present even now in the church. God continues to be with us through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

3. A third and final thought. These are not just the fleeting appearances of God behind which God is remote or concealed. These are the expressions of who God really is, for ever creating, redeeming and sanctifying us. Light from light, true God from true God, as

the Creed says. The Word and the Spirit belong to God; they disclose God as above us, beside us, and in us. God is mysterious certainly, but God is also revealed and known. So what we say about God has a trinitarian form – triunity, it seems, is essential to our faith.

And last a practical suggestion. If this doctrine seems a bit remote from your experience, don't worry. It probably is, since in some ways it's a second-order doctrine of the Christian faith. It's like the plumbing or the wiring systems in our homes. We don't really see them – they're under the floorboards or in cavity spaces. And as long as the water flows in the right places and the lights come on when we press the switch, we don't think too much about these systems. But if something goes wrong with the plumbing or the electricity, well, we soon know about it. I think that the doctrine of the Trinity may function similarly. It's there informing our worship and our language, but it's in the background to what we say about God. So let's affirm the creed in all its particulars, and fill in the gaps with our imagination, without worrying too much about the plumbing. As we do so, we celebrate the faith of the church across the ages in one God, Father, Son and Spirit.