

Sunday 11th June, 2017 - Trinity Sunday
Year A
Exodus 34:1-8
Psalm: Song of the Three Young Men
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Many of you may know that in the Anglican tradition we have three Creeds on which our faith is based. Two of these, the Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed, are reasonably familiar to us, and one of them is used in most Anglican parishes of our tradition on most weeks of the year. You may, however, be less familiar with the third Creed contained within our Articles of Religion. This Creed is called the Athanasian Creed.

It is so named because it was attributed to St. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. In reality, however, it was probably written by another fifth-century theologian whose name is unknown. It was included in the Book of Common Prayer, and indeed is in our current Prayer Book also, but you have probably never seen it or said it. And there is a pretty good reason for that. It is long - very long! And its language is dense, as it seeks to theologically unpack the Christian faith, and in particular the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity. Just to give you a sense, here are just 5 of the 42 verses of the Athanasian Creed:

“Now the Catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.” Got that??

You will be pleased to know, I'm sure, that I do not plan to make my sermon this morning an intellectual exercise in understanding the Doctrine of the Trinity. One reason is that many before me have tried and failed - many, by the way, who were much cleverer and more theologically astute than I. But the main reason is that I actually don't believe that what we celebrate today is a Doctrine to be understood and reasoned about. Rather, like the doctrine of the resurrection also, it is not about understanding it, but rather *experiencing* it, and impacting on how we live our lives.

It has been estimated that after the persons of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, the next most captured image in all of the icons ever written is that of the Trinity. And the reason for that is actually quite simple - what do we do when we struggle to find reason in something? We try a different form, a different media. When words fail us, sometimes music steps in. When intellect fails, sometimes the brushstrokes, and colours, and images of an icon capture far more than we are ever able to describe.

So, today, let's not try and tie ourselves in proverbial 3-ended knots, as we try and separate the Father, Son, and Spirit, yet not separate them too far to fall into one heresy, nor consider them as one "thing" either, lest we fall into a different heresy. Rather, let us consider the Trinity as the different ways in which we might experience God. After all, unless we can experience something of God's power, love, and grace in our lives it doesn't mean much does it, even if we can recite the words or ascribe to the belief. No, the Trinity is about understanding that God is essentially beyond our knowing - but that we can see and know and touch and taste God's presence in so many ways.

So how, then, do we know God? Well, let's start with the obvious. Did any of you notice that it was cold this morning? Yes, but wasn't the sky a brilliant blue? So, I like to imagine how cold it must have been at the beginning of creation, before God placed the sun in the sky, and separated the earth from the seas, and gave us life and breath. Yes, I experience God in nature...

The other day I was fortunate enough to be taken out to a delicious lunch with a very kind friend. We enjoyed wonderful food, and even a drop (just a small drop, mind you, of wine). And we were also privileged to listen to a wonderful local poet, Chris Wallace-Crabb read a number of his poems, explaining the story behind them, or the context in which they were written. And even though, in his words “I am not a practicing Christian”, so many of his poems ask the questions that theologians, and people of faith wrestle with, as well as many deep philosophical question too.

In this experience, then, I found signs of God’s presence - the fellowship enjoyed as we shared God’s bounty; the intellect behind and the sheer beauty of poetry, well written; the serious task of humanity wrestling and struggling with deep questions of life. Is not God in all of that? (to say nothing of God being in the grape and the grain!)

Yes, God desires to be known, to be in relationship with us. Therefore God reveals himself (herself) to us, in a way that translates into a more accessible experience to finite, sense-bound, time-bound human beings. We in our Christian tradition have experienced God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit - an experience of reality and person that we can understand (mostly), describe (mostly), talk-about (sort of) and explore.

But again, is this enough - the ability to see God’s presence around us? It’s a start, certainly, but it is not the end of the story, nor indeed the essence of it. I believe, as surely as I start the words of the Creed with “I believe” - I believe that unless we know God *within us* as well as around us, we do not really know God.

In trying to answer how we know God within us, I turn to where I often turn when I need inspiration - to our former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. In speaking of the Trinity, Rowan says this: “Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.

The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tell us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God."

Knowing God *within us*, not just around us, is about understanding ourselves as beloved sons and daughters of God. It is about knowing and accepting yourself as loved, and as being under the rule of Grace - not the burden of Law. Until we can say "yes, I am enough", or "I know that God loves me in the same, complete way that Jesus was loved", then we can recite the Athanasian Creed and learn it and even comprehend it in our heads as much as we like, but we are not moved by the mystery of the Trinity.

That's a challenge for our western, post-modern, intellectual minds to accept, I know. And some days I am better at it than others. But I know it to be true - in my heart...

What we celebrate today is a journey of exploration of mystery... this is a deepening relationship with God... the ground of all being... the heart of all life. The doctrine of the Trinity is designed to call us beyond our pride... our illusion of mastery and control... to deep humility... to awe and wonder... to love - and above all to know ourselves loved, and held in God's Grace and Mercy.

In the name of God, Amen.