

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

May 22nd 2016 – Trinity Sunday

John 3.1-15

Who are you calling God? Or, to put it another way, who's in your mind or what's in your mind when you say 'God'? - when you pray to God, when you talk about him?

We've all been told enough times since school assemblies not to think of God as a great big beardie ruling us from a shiny throne on high. But it's very easy to slip into something like a nursery-school picture, of the old man in the sky. Not just in a crude way, like Zeus with his thunderbolts. But still, an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God, at the centre of the heavenly realms of eternity, the creator of all that is, was and will be, the creator of time itself... How do we imagine that? How do we imagine *him*?

Trinity Sunday is the day to have a bit of a think about this. It's a day which strikes dread into preachers and into those being preached at, if they're at all regular at church. Is this going to be another shamrock sermon, or the three-eared rabbit? Well, I do have an image to share with you, and some will have heard it before. But it's a good one!

Trinity Sunday forces us to think about what we actually mean by 'God'. The idea of the Trinity came together really quite slowly – over the first four centuries of the Church; and pretty painfully – there were even riots! This was a process which began with the raw experience of encounter with God in Jesus Christ; then with the raw experience of the absence of God, after the Ascension; and then the intense but almost indescribable re-encounter with God at Pentecost, like flames of fire and rushing wind - the coming of the Holy Spirit. Out of this 33-year vortex at the very heart of our world's history was spun the Church, the breathing body of believers in Jesus Christ as Saviour of the world.

Those who had the job of recording the story of those 33 years, and of the beginnings of the Church, were taking the first stumbling steps of Christian believers to understand the fullness of God (and recording those first steps too). From the outset they had a sense of a three-ness in God, as well as the one-ness which was at the very core of ancient Jewish tradition. Although it defied coherent argument, they had discovered, they knew, that God was to be encountered not just in the Father, but also in Jesus and in the Spirit. There were vital stories: the Baptism of Jesus, say, or the last words of Jesus: 'go and baptise all the nations in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'.

This discovery, this belief, this knowledge, was rooted in actual experience; in the experience of actual people, the experience of God-with-them. The task then was to try to understand and describe this experience. It was a move from the desire to praise to the desire to explain; what we might call a move from doxology to doctrine. As a result we have some very complex theology. So here we go.

At its heart is a fundamental distinction. The technical terms are the *metaphysical* Trinity and the *economic* Trinity. Despite the jargon it's an important distinction. The metaphysical Trinity is how we understand the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit and their relationships in the eternal realms of heaven, beyond our experience, beyond our talking, really: this is Trinity 'pure'. The economic Trinity is how we understand the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit to be related to us: how we have encountered them in this world, and what that means for the whole of time and space. This is Trinity 'applied'.

Historically, and in our own experience, we can only start from the applied; we can only start from the myriad ways in which God has met us in this world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And for all of us, since the Ascension itself, that has meant meeting God in ways where the three and the one are all mixed up. We sense they are distinct. We believe that those centuries of thinking were right to find a way of describing God as Three and God as One. But the more we try to get to the pure version, the hazier and harder it seems to get.

This is bound to be the case! We are trying to talk about the inner workings of God himself. So this is the moment to leave behind the academic language and introduce that image for thinking about the Trinity which I promised. For this I shall need my assistant, who is, I hope, poised at the organ.

[Aural demonstration]

That's the best way I know to get your head round threeness and oneness co-existing. You're hearing three distinct sounds, and yet at the same time you're hearing just one sound – and that's not a fourth sound, it's still only the three.

No wonder our religion is such a scandal to some of the others in the world; and to that angry wizened little thing that is modern atheism. But this is part of our glorious, mysterious inheritance of faith. And it's not just mysterious, it's also concrete. We heard it in the gospel reading.

Nicodemus met God in Jesus, who told him of the Holy Spirit; and told him that God the Father had sent the Son so that all who believe in him might have life in eternity. That meeting and conversation were one part of the very real encounter with God which gave birth to our faith and to our hope. This really is a cause for rejoicing. It's tough stuff, but remember – for doctrinal headaches, take Paradox!