

Sermon: 'This, this is the God we adore'

Revd. Gordon Newton

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster – 30th May 2010 6.30 pm

LESSON: John 14:15-21

Disciples reflecting on their experience of Jesus

"One can't believe impossible things" said Alice – in the story of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland. "I dare say you haven't had much practice" replied the white queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half an hour each day. Why, sometimes I believed six impossible things before breakfast"!

That's how some people regard Trinity Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate our faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three in one and one in three.

Or, as the Athanasian Creed puts it:

"The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible" – leading one school boy to add the comment: "and the whole jolly thing incomprehensible!"

The doctrine of the Trinity arose out of the experience of those early Christians and particularly the experience of the first disciples and close friends of Jesus. These were a group of very ordinary men and women who knew Jesus as a man, who shared life with Him, and who came to realise that He was more than a man. And this became more obvious as time went on and they watched him speak truths with a profundity they had never heard anywhere else, as they watched him get right inside the minds and hearts of people and transform them, and as they watched Him at prayer with "His Father".

They came to realise that, in Jesus, they had met the God whom the scriptures and teachers in the Synagogues talked about.

And this growing awareness that Jesus was God's son is described in some of the conversations of John chapter 14. Philip says: "Show us the father and that will be enough" and Jesus replies – with a hint of exhausted frustration: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been along you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father".

Add to this growing awareness the events of Easter and the Ascension and Pentecost and the disciples become new people as the promise that Jesus had made is fulfilled and they are "filled with the Spirit". "I will ask the Father and He will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever." After the day of Pentecost the disciples

just knew that Jesus had not left them, and that – in some strange way – He became closer to them than He had ever been in the days of His flesh. “Closer than breathing”, as St. Theresa put it.

The Trinity is not so much a matter of impossible doctrine but an expression of experience.

It is what distinguishes the Christian faith from all other religions, because it is about what God has *revealed* of Himself.

We might do well to take the advice of the 8th century saint, John of Damascus: “and so let the faithful adore God with a mind that is not overcurious.”

Many Christians have expressed their belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit by offering praise through art and architecture and music.

We are now going to see some images of how this doctrine has been expressed through church architecture and then listen as Gerard Brooks (our Director of Music) introduces us to a musical interpretation of the Trinity.

Photographs of art and architecture expressing the Trinity

- 1 *Icon of the Trinity – Church of the Ascension, Arizona.*
- 2 *Wood carving – icon of the Trinity – Trinity Lutheran Church, Detroit.*
- 3 *Facade of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris.*
- 4 *Stained glass window showing Christ, the hand of the Father and the Dove of the Spirit, Darmstadt, Indiana.*
- 5 *Three spires of the Church of the Trinity, Nikitniki.*
- 6 *Trinitarian plan of an Orthodox church interior, showing Narthex, Nave and Sanctuary.*

Introduction by Gerard Brooks (Director of Music) and the playing of Fugue in Eb (The St. Ann fugue) by J.S. Bach

Gerard explained how Bach expressed his Christian belief in his music and the Trinitarian theme that is found particularly in this fugue.

“This, this is the God we adore”

Sadly, the doctrine of the Trinity has often been the source of argument amongst Christians and various attempts to analyse it have led to many different heresies and heated arguments. Even when the Trinity hasn't been the source of argument, it has often proved the cause of much bewilderment. Some of you shared in the same Lent group as me, this year, where we focussed on the Cross of Jesus and we found ourselves involved in much head-scratching on at least two occasions as we tried to

understand and explain what was happening when Jesus was on the cross. Where was God?

But the Trinity takes us into the heart of God Himself and explores this wonderful relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we begin to marvel at this relationship of three persons in unity.

The bible talks of a thoroughly co-operative venture:-

- *The Father speaks and the Spirit moves and creation takes place.
- *The Father sends and the Son comes to earth.
- *The Spirit enables the Son to do the Father's work on earth.
- *The Son tells how He is showing people what the Father is like.
- *The Son promises the Spirit and the Spirit is sent to the disciples by the Father.

Some of you may have read the book entitled: "The Shack." (see footnote) It's a novel written by William Young and it is a reflection on suffering – but it has an interesting sub-plot as a reflection on the Trinity!

The story is based in the USA and concerns a man called Mack whose daughter is abducted. There is evidence that she may have been murdered and abandoned in a shack deep in the wilderness of Oregon. Four years later Mac is still unable to cope with this suffering and he receives a suspicious note, purporting to come from God, inviting him to that shack (where he believed his daughter was murdered) and spend the week-end with God.

He decides to accept. And much of the novel is about what he finds when he gets there.

He meets three characters who give him a warm welcome and envelope him in love and understanding for the whole week-end, allowing him to vent his anger and pain.

The three characters represent God: A large beaming African/American woman who represents God the Father; a small, distinctively Asian woman (who collects tears), the Holy Spirit; and a Middle Eastern man, dressed like a labourer and wearing jeans, who represents Jesus. It is this week-end encounter with God in His totality that enables Mack to return home coping with his suffering – for the first time. There's nothing remote or simply academic about that. It's a presentation of the God who is relevant to and present in every part of our lives – even the grittiest and most difficult parts.

But the sub-plot in the book, this relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is fascinating. Perhaps it helps us to see that the unity of purpose and action of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is even better than a well oiled machine where all the parts run smoothly and quietly and effectively.

And that stands in stark contrast to most of our human relationships that are like machines where some parts don't fit, other parts are worn away, and other parts have

become dried up – consequently the whole machine grinds away noisily and operates ineffectively, sometimes almost coming to a standstill.

Relationships are at the heart of human life. How well we get on with one another is absolutely vital to our happiness and well being and our sense of purpose and fulfilment.

As we use this Trinity Sunday to move us to adoration and praise of the God who has revealed Himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we do well – also – to realise that *in His very being* God has offered us a model for all human relationships Creative, Redemptive, and Empowering – with perfect love at the very heart.

As we come to the Lord's Table tonight to share in the sacrament of Holy Communion I invite you to bring two things with you:

Firstly, to use this opportunity to be full of adoration for all God *is* and for all He has done.

And secondly to offer to Him all our relationships and ask that the Holy Spirit may enable us to model our relationships with one another on the relationship of God Himself with the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – one in three and three in one.

HYMN: This, this is the God we adore.

This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable friend,
Whose love is as great as his power,
And neither knows measure nor end:

'Tis Jesus, the first and the last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that's to come.

Joseph Hart

Footnote:

"The Shack" William P.Young

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