

Sermon on Sunday 4 June 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

They/them (Trinity)

'What are your words?' is the title of a new children's book by the author Katherine Locke. It tells the story of a kid named Ari who identifies as gender fluid, and who tries out different pronouns depending on how they're feeling that day; he/him, she/her, they/them.

Like me, perhaps you find it tricky to navigate the world of gender pronouns. Like me, perhaps it's taking you time to catch up. Like me, perhaps you sometimes get it wrong. To use someone's chosen pronoun isn't just a basic act of kindness and manners, it's an affirmation of who they are.

What I don't understand are those who deliberately get it wrong; those who, sometimes on religious grounds, refuse to use a person's preferred pronoun. That, I think, is both arrogant (I know better) and cruel (I would rather hurt you than change the way I speak about you). Some, of course, might point to scripture; God created two fixed genders; male and female in God's image. What they overlook, of course, is that God defies gender.

Most of our God-talk, unsurprisingly, is He/Him, simply because the cultures describing God in the Bible were patriarchal, male

dominated. But, of course, we also find many feminine images of God in scripture. And, back to Genesis, God created male and female in God's image. So, God is both/and, but also neither/nor.

Today is Trinity, where we celebrate that impossible belief that God is One but also Three. And maybe those gender-neutral pronouns are actually the best fit for describing God. God is best described, perhaps, as they/them.

Now, possibly that's heresy, but then most talk of Trinity is heresy.

I'm proud to be ranked among the heretics, because actually in the final analysis that's what we all are. Anyone who says they have God sewn up is deluded because God will always be beyond our words, our ideas, our imagining.

From its official formulation in the 4th Century, debates about the doctrine of the Trinity have caused no end of ructions and schisms; it's actually what finally tore the Eastern and Western Churches apart.

Now, call me a coward but I don't propose even to begin to try to unpack the mechanics of how this Three in One works. I'll let others argue that one.

Instead, I want to talk a bit about what I understand to be something of the dynamics within the Trinity, and to ask the

question; well, so what? What impact does this divine conundrum actually have on my life?

If we're honest, I think most of us tend to think of a hierarchy within the Trinity; a triangle, if you like, with God the Father, the boss at the top, ably assisted by deputies, Son and Spirit. That, you might be interested to know, is - surprise, surprise - heresy. Orthodoxy, or 'Right' belief, claims that each Person of the Trinity is coequal. So, sticking with geometric shapes, a better visual aid would be a circle; a circle of coequal, self-giving, eternal love.

The most beautiful definition Scripture offers us of God is contained in three words - God is Love. And this, I think, helps us make some sense of the Trinity. For love to exist there has to be relationship; Father with Son, Son with Spirit, Spirit with Father...

Dividing out the roles of the different Persons of the Trinity (ie Father as Creator, Son; Saviour and Spirit Sustainer) is a bit helpful, but we're told, for example, that both Jesus and the Spirit were also involved with the Father in creation, so there's obviously overlap. Equally, both the Father and the Spirit suffered with the Son upon the cross. And if we stop there for a moment - that's actually mind blowing; in Jesus both the joy and the pain of being human entered the heart of the Triune God and for the first time the Creator fully empathised with creation. So, when we approach God the Trinity, we come to One who understands intimately, from personal experience, what it is to be you and what it is to be me.

And through the Spirit we are each invited into this intimacy; this circle dance of divine love, where all are embraced; all treasured, all equally valued.

It's ironic that the doctrine of the Trinity should have originally caused so much division. The Trinity like nothing else is the embodiment of acceptance and unity in diversity. If there's one thing that draws us away from Trinitarian Love, it's the obsession with being right. In my naivety, I used to think that if you were following God and listening faithfully to the Spirit you would find the right interpretation of scripture, for instance. What I've discovered is that equally faithful followers can arrive at very different convictions about what is right and what is wrong.

And maybe that's deliberate; maybe God allows those different convictions because he wants to teach us the wisdom of humility; because he longs for us to look into the eyes of the other and see him; because his dream for us is to choose to love regardless of right or wrong. As the Persian poet Rumi once wrote, 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there'.

We must learn how to disagree well, how to hold right relationships in higher regard than being right. Back to where we began with gender pronouns. Any church that rejects trans people or those who identify differently, reject the Trinity, in whose image all are created.

So, what might this circle dance of co-equal, self-giving, eternal love mean for you? This Father that surrounds us, this Son beside us, this Spirit within us, is asking us to trust that love; to step inside, because when we do, we realise that we've never actually been outside. Is the Trinity asking us to hold lightly what we hold too tightly? Are they asking to empower us to forgive or be forgiven; to open and stretch our hearts and minds to a wider, more spacious, more inclusive love for others?



A prayer

God be the road on which you travel; he the mountains on which you are tested and challenged. He the wells at which you find healing and peace.

Christ be the light by which you travel; He the vision which informs and enlarges you. He the North star shining in your darkest night.

The Spirit inspire you as you travel; She the restlessness driving you onwards. She the stillness leading you to the heart of God.

The Trinity, the Three, go with you as you travel; and may the journey begin, continue and end in Them. Amen