

Sunday 16 June 2019

Readings: Romans 5. 1-5; John 16. 12-15

I pray that I may speak in name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Let's cast our minds back to a year ago. I was about to be ordained deacon and become your curate.

My husband, Dale, and I came for a visit to both churches and it was Trinity Sunday. Alan was preaching and as he prepared to grapple with the complex concept known as the Trinity, he joked that he wouldn't have to do so again the following year, as it was an ideal week to make the curate preach.

At the time, I hoped it was a joke, but obviously not!

So, this year it's my turn to try to make sense of the very core of our belief as Christians. A belief that God can be both one and three.

Let's return to last May when we first met. We were strangers. And our natural inclination was to immediately find out things about each other.

You would have started working out what sort of person I am and I'd have done the same with each of you. That's because humans are generally programmed to want to know more about other people. Not because we are nosy, but because we are relational. We are sociable.

However, even if on that first meeting, information about me was shared or worked out, that doesn't necessarily mean that you knew me much better than you did before. Knowing that I am originally from Portsmouth, for example, is only interesting if we go on to share more.

As, over this year, we have spent more time together, we have learnt more about one another, both factually and, more importantly, about who we really are.

Yet, however fascinating we find each other, it is actually quite hard to get to know someone properly, and we can never, ever know someone else completely.

Although I've been married to Dale for almost 34 years, he can and does still surprise me. Certainly, I know him better than anyone else does, but my knowledge is still partial and incomplete. Perhaps that's for the best!

Now, you and I were made in the image of God, and I think we can, therefore, presume that if our primary interest in life is our relationships, then that is also the primary concern of God.

He does have a certain advantage in that he is God and, therefore, he knows everything about us that there is to know.

But he also has a major disadvantage, in that he is God, and so is immensely more complicated than us. How can we ever comprehend what it is like to be infinite, or omnipresent (which means everywhere) or eternal?

As my contribution to the debate about the Trinity, can I suggest that the Trinity shows us God's desire to reveal himself as fully as possible?

Now, the Trinity is pretty advanced theology. It wasn't really agreed until the 4th century when a group of senior Christians met at Nicaea. The issue that was most hotly debated was the status of Jesus and the bulk of the Creed is there to cement the belief in his divinity.

The aim of the Nicene Creed was to try to explain how the Trinity works in an easy to understand, concise format! Uniquely, it is a creed upheld by all parts of Christianity – East and West. Yet the terminology of the Creed can serve to make God seem even more mysterious.

This attempt to clarify our belief in God as one but also God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is said by many Christians regularly, even weekly. Yet how often do we reflect on its meaning?

For example, the creed can make these three aspects of God's revelation appear to be chronological – first Father (as portrayed in the Old Testament), then Son (as revealed in the Gospels) and then Holy Spirit, which was sent at Pentecost.

And this can inadvertently lead to a hierarchy – with Father at the top, then Jesus, then Holy Spirit.

But what the Creed explains to us, is that while God may have chosen to reveal himself in three different ways, actually those three faces of God have been there for all time – consubstantial and co-eternal, as in the

original words of the hymn 'Christ is made the Sure Foundation'.
Consubstantial means of the same essence.

Now, I believe that God always knows what he's doing – so why did he choose to reveal himself in these three ways? Perhaps, it might be partly to do with the evolution of human thinking – he revealed each aspect, as humankind was ready and willing to understand it.

The idea of one God was pretty radical when God first revealed himself to the Israelites, thousands of years ago. To help the Israelites, God primarily revealed himself as what we tend to think of as God the Father. The idea of Father was one the Israelites could readily understand, and still today for those of us who have enjoyed a positive relationship with our own dads, it can be a helpful one.

My dad, Winston, is a lovely big cuddly bear of a man, and to me, therefore, the concept of God the Father is a comforting one, although I can completely see that is not so for everyone. However, one problem with fathers in that you can disappoint them.

Indeed, throughout the Old Testament we are told how the Israelites struggle to retain this intimate parent-child relationship with God, frequently appearing to view God as a rather remote Victorian style Father, rather than as a daddy who loves them. He often became, in their minds, a God who made rules, then got cross and punished you when you got things wrong.

So, it seems God decided to act, to remind humankind that he loved us, that he wanted to enjoy a close relationship with us, that he understood our pains and our joys. Indeed, was willing to share them.

And so, he came to Earth as a baby, as Jesus, as what we call God the Son. In doing so he changed human history, opening the way for many more people to enjoy a personal and rewarding relationship with him. He revealed himself as a God for all people not just the Jews.

Then, because he could not stay with us forever as Jesus, because we had to learn to make that relationship independently, he revealed himself as Holy Spirit so that we might always know his power and never feel alone.

Now, I am not suggesting that God started as Father, then moved onto Son, then eventually Holy Spirit.

That is officially heresy and best avoided by curates approaching their priesting.

What I am suggesting is that God did not fully and explicitly reveal himself until Pentecost. There are, indeed, hints of both Son and Holy Spirit throughout the Old Testament, if you care to look for them, although non-Christians would find alternative explanations.

And God as Trinity allows different kinds of people to forge a relationship with him. Some of us mainly think of God the Father when we pray, some of us are 'Jesus people' and there are many people who identify with God the Holy Spirit.

Whichever person of God we relate to best, if we want a relationship with God then we have to work at it. We have to try to understand the words of scripture, including the trickier bits like today's readings. John and Paul did not write for those who want superficial knowledge, but for those willing to try to decipher the mysteries of God. We have to pay attention to the words of the creeds and ponder on what they really mean, so that when we say 'I believe' we know what it is we are saying.

And it's ok to question, even to admit that you don't truly believe all or even most of it.

So, what might we have we learned? That the Trinity is a complex and mysterious concept. Even attempts to clarify it, just make it more complex and mysterious. Theology is hard!

That we have to accept that we cannot, in this lifetime, hope to understand God fully.

And that no sermon was ever going to unpack the mystery of the Trinity-least of all, this one.

Never mind, it's Alan's turn again next year!

