

Trinity Sunday – Year A

Community of God

Readings: Genesis 1: 1 – 2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13: 11 – 13

Matthew 28: 16 – 20

The lectionary around this time of the Christian year is always a challenging read. We've grappled with some difficult ideas about what we believe and how they shape us as a faith community. Two Sundays ago we tried to imagine what the ascension of Christ was about and last week we pondered how we might engage with the work of the Holy

Spirit. Today on Trinity Sunday, we wrestle with the concept of God as three-in-one and one-in-three – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer or whatever other terms we want to use to get a hang on the Trinity.

Whether we like it or not, as Christians we cannot avoid the questions and the issues that arise from the idea of God as Trinity. Do we believe in one God or three? Christianity was born from its Jewish roots that believed in one God. The affirmation of the Shemā in Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone is one.” And as the Church, we affirm the centrality of Jesus

Christ in our Christian faith; that through him all of creation was brought into being and through him we also have eternal life. Yet, throughout the New Testament writings, numerous references to the Father and Holy Spirit have strongly indicated their divine connection. Jesus is revealed as the Son of God who came from the Father and who also gave the Holy Spirit to his followers.

From our readings today, it appears that the earliest ideas about the Trinity in the Christian Church were connected with baptism. From Matthew 28: 19 we hear, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and

of the Holy Spirit.” The Apostle Paul’s famous ‘Grace’ (2 Cor. 13: 13) is also an indication of early Trinitarian theology. There are, however, a large number of indirect references to the Trinity, of which Galatians 4:6 maybe considered as the most primitive: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ In this we hear the idea of Father, Son and Spirit being tied to the one God.

Again the question arises, is God one God or three gods? Are there three equal gods that make up one God? I’d like to, if I can, briefly

outline some of the significant developments about the concept of Trinity in the Church.

The fledgling Christian communities of the 1st century, who were on the fringes of Greco-Roman society, seemed to have accepted the Trinity as part of what it meant to be in the Church. But as the Church began to consolidate its place among other religious groups of its time it began facing all kinds of challenges and persecution from the established authorities. This included intellectual attacks on the beliefs and practices of Christians as a community.

As a way of defending itself some in the Church, known as ‘Apologists’, began trying to define it. They primarily tried to explain what it believed; particularly with respect to the idea of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But even Christians had different ideas about God. As early as the 2nd century in 151 C.E. people like Justin Martyr began teasing out the idea of the Trinity.¹ He mainly focused on the nature and meaning of Christ as Logos and, although he used a Trinitarian formula, he still saw Christ as subordinate to the Father. Similarly, Athenagoras in 177 C.E.

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson & David F. Wright (eds.), New Dictionary of Theology, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, 38.

argued that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were united in power, yet distinguished in rank.²

Towards the end of the 2nd century Tertullian was of the opinion that there was one God, in whom could be found three ‘persons’ or ‘persona’ in Latin and ‘hypostasis’ in Greek. This word denoted a sense of ‘being’ or ‘substantial reality’, with reference either to the stuff or substance of which a thing consisted.³ God was understood as one because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit consisted of the same substance or stuff. This concept was based on the belief that God the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 692.

Father brought forth his two hands, the Son and Holy Spirit, to serve as mediators in creating the world. This approach related to the three successive phases of God's dealing with the world from creation onwards. Human history could be divided into three periods, each of which belonged to a different person of the Godhead.⁴ The Old Testament was the age of the Father, the gospel period the age of the Son and the time since Pentecost the age of the Holy Spirit. Yet, even this view wasn't deemed unsatisfactory since it tied the Trinity to the time and space framework, and because it lent itself to modalism, the belief that the

⁴ Ibid.

one God appeared to humankind in three different modes.⁵

In the 3rd century Origen continued the debate by saying that although the Son was subordinate to the Father, both the Son and Spirit were co-eternal with the Father. By the 4th century, a priest named Arius questioned this and proposed that if the Son was begotten of the Father, then there must have been a time when the Son was not or had not existed. In other words the Son had a beginning and was, therefore, not co-eternal with the Father. This questioned the deity of Jesus Christ and the fundamental core of the Christian faith. As

⁵ Ibid.

a result councils of church leaders were called from everywhere to meet at Nincea in 325 C.E. and then at Constantinople in 381 C.E. to establish the Church's position on this matter.

Critical to this were the works of Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea. Athanasius argued that the Son was not to be regarded as part of God, nor was he a second deity; he was simply God himself, in whom the fullness of divinity dwelt (Col. 2:8) and in whom the Father himself was to be seen (Jn. 14:9). Basil championed the idea that the Holy Spirit was God because Scripture called it the Lord and life-giver, and as well as proceeding from the Father (Jn. 15:26), and therefore, gave it the

honour of being worshipped alongside the Father and Son.⁶

But it wasn't until the beginning of the 5th century that the work of Augustine of Hippo cemented the acceptance of the Trinity. Augustine contemplated the Holy Spirit as 'gift' and 'love'.⁷ As the bond of communion between Father and Son, the Spirit is their mutual love as well as the gift that unites God's people. In this line of thinking, Augustine linked Trinity and Church. At the heart of his theology was the idea of community.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 60.

Although, I've summarised some of the arguments about Trinitarian theology, it is the affirmation of the community of God that stands out for me. It was the value of community for the early Church, their communion with each other and with God that started it all. Defining what they believed was important, but that belief was, more importantly, to define them as a community and how they related with each other in their community. The idea of God was never something that people could fully grasp. Can God as mystery really be explained? Can the Spirit really be pinned down to our rational thinking? Can God really be scientifically proved or disproved? I don't think so. But

what was before them, then, and before us today in real and tangible ways are people; people who, not just think, but who also act and interact with other people; people who are in community in one way or another.

It is in community, as Augustine noted, that we recognise and value the other and the relationship we're in; including the community we're in. We, as Christians are in community with God and we can recognise and value that. We are also in community with each other as well being encompassed in God's community. And in this Trinitarian way of thinking, the challenge is to live that out in ways that reflect the love, value and respect

which affirms and grows relationships and community.

This, I believe is our identity – the way we define ourselves as followers of Jesus. Jesus didn't tell his disciples that people would know them by what they knew or believed (although that's important); rather by how they loved one another (Jn. 13:35). When Jesus commissioned them to go and make disciples and baptise them in the name of the Trinity, I think their work was to embrace the essence of the Trinity – which is community. I think making disciples is more about building relationships and community rather than just teaching people what you know. Those that

are baptised are baptised into God's community that recognises and values or loves those involved. Even the benediction we usually say together from 2 Corinthians 13:13 is based on Paul's plea to the Church to "Put things in order... [and] agree with one another, [and] live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13: 11).

On this Trinity Sunday, we here at First Church are challenged to consider what it means for us in being the body of Christ. How might our understanding of the Trinity shape the way we organise ourselves and operate as a faith community? How might it shape the

way we relate with others who are similar or different to us? How might it shape our discipleship and the way we make disciples? And do our beliefs consistently translate into loving service where relationships are affirmed and grown?

Even if we struggle to find adequate answers to these questions and are found wanting for the way we treat others around us and the way we think about or respond to God, I think that doesn't change the way God relates with us – that doesn't change the way God is in community with us; the ways God loves us none-the-less. “Remember”, said Jesus, “I am

with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). Amen.