

Trinity Sunday

3rd June 2012

Readings: Romans 8: 12 – 17

On this Trinity Sunday, it is not always easy preaching about the Trinity. Perhaps people prefer to hear about how relevant the Trinity is to our life rather than getting bogged down in theological and doctrinal arguments. Can we really get our heads around the idea of God being one, yet at the same time God is Three-in-One? Is this interrelationship made easier or more difficult to understand when we use different words such as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer? The words, metaphors and allegory we use can go some way to help our understanding, but pinning down God to a clear and precise human explanation is most difficult.

Yet, for many people, God is an important part of their life. We in the church may not fully comprehend or are able to articulate or explain God, but our faith in and relationship with God is fundamental to the way we organise ourselves and live out our faith.

I've found that a helpful way of thinking about God as being Three-in-One is using the concept of family and community.

When looking again at our epistle reading from Romans, the main thrust of this text is not so much to explain Trinitarian theology as to draw Paul's audience into the family of God. We hear the repetition of this theme

through relationships such as that of brothers and sisters, believers as children of God, God as Father, children as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Paul's purpose generally in chapter 8 is to explain what it means for Christians to live life through the Spirit. In this passage, he focuses specifically on the Spirit drawing believers into God's family; – into the community of God. He wants the community of Christians to understand themselves as being in the community of God.

It is in the family, in the community that people can belong. Everyone senses the need to belong. Psychologists tell us the most basic human need is for security. Children need to know whom to trust, whom to call “mummy” or “daddy,” and where they can feel safe. We have heard about those studies showing that orphan babies have died from lack of human contact. Even when given excellent food and care, they suffer for want of the most elemental needs: to belong to a family, to have someone to hold them, to know the presence of someone who cares, to know the presence of a loving parent.

All people have the same basic need for belonging: people to call friends and family, relationships that are meaningful and safe, places that feel like home. Robert Frost captured this human characteristic in a poem about Old Silas, an unreliable farmhand who, though no longer welcome, returned to a certain farm to die. The farmer's wife said he had come home. But the farmer said that because Silas had left when he was most needed, he was

certainly not returning to a place he could call home. His wife countered, “Home is the place where, when you have to go, they have to take you in.”¹

Everyone needs to know where they belong and to whom they belong. Jesus, who knew no permanent home, surrounded himself with people he felt at home with. He even assigned them nicknames (James and John were the Sons of Thunder) and spoke of intimate things with them. He drew them into his most intimate relationship, the one he had with Abba, to whom he frequently prayed.

Paul is drawing on this relationship. It belongs, he says, to everyone who follows Christ. He even uses the same intimate term that Jesus used. It was such a fitting way to speak about the parental nature of God that the earliest followers of Jesus used it too and refrained from translating it from Aramaic into Greek. When Paul speaks of the family of God here, he says that by the Spirit, we also “cry, Abba!” When we do this, Paul says that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (v.14). The benefits of this relationship are that Christians become heirs of all that God has to offer, even fellow heirs with Christ.

This is a Trinitarian relationship that bears immediately upon people. The Three-in-One establishes a home for us.

¹ Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathern, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 34-40.

This should come as refreshing news to people who are searching for identity and belonging. Perhaps most striking are the ways that young people carry themselves as they attempt to fit into society. Some buy the latest clothes, others shave their heads or wear hair colours once seen only for emergency vehicles or have their body tattooed. The more extreme or desperate mutilate their bodies with studs and razors.

But the young are not alone in this. Many adults believe you cannot be too rich or too thin. The cost of our houses and cars remains a sign of our place in the world. Whether we belong to a street gang or a country club, we drape our flesh in symbols of those groups that provide us a sense of belonging.

Paul identifies a more certain identity. It has nothing to do with what we wear or how we decorate or mutilate our flesh. In fact, when we are in the Spirit, things of the flesh – whether fashion or food, self-expression or sex – are put into perspective. The basic things of life – food, clothing, relationships – needed and enjoyed by all people. But they should not define or consume us. Christian identity is found in relationship to God. The intimate relationship of faith is richer than others because it is established by the Spirit of God and will not fail. And even if it leads us into challenging or threatening circumstances as we share in Christ's suffering, we have the assurance of God's parental love, the Spirit's power, and presence of our brother Christ.

It may not be easy for people to talk about the interrelationship of God as Trinity; neither easy for some to talk about family relationships or that in a community, but relationships are still important for people. They may not always be happy and easy to manage, but they are fundamental to our being and existence. The truth of the matter is that we need others in our lives. We need a place we can call home and people with whom we can call family; and a life in which we can live and call community. For Christians, that home, family and community include God. Even though we may not be able to get our heads around the idea of God the Three-in-One, we can be confident that as people of the triune God, we all belong together. We belong together in the family and community of God with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.