

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel – Sermon on June 15th 2013 (Trinity Sunday)

Readings: Isaiah 6.1-8 and Matthew 28.16-20

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

A lady was invited by the captain of the cruise ship she was travelling on to join him on the bridge. While she was there they passed a small desert island. The lady pointed to a man on the island who was jumping up and down frantically waving his arms: „What is he doing?“ she asked.

„I don't know.“, said the captain of the ship, „We pass this island once a year. He always does it. I think, he doesn't like us coming near his island.“

As we are travelling through the liturgical year, today we are passing the Island of Trinidad. Trinity island.

The safest thing for the preacher would be to travel on. Take no risks. Preach on a Biblical text in the safe knowledge that „Trinity“ is not a concept of the Bible.

Or one could of course stop here and take that Biblical castaway on board.

Unwashed and unkempt, difficult as he may be. And run the risk of being of accused of trafficking dangerous or misleading ideas by theology's customs & immigration officers at the next harbour.

So let us talk about the Trinity...

One God – Three persons. At my sons' Sunday School they have videos these days to do the teaching and also to accompany the singing. In one of these videos, I remember that an equation was flashing up several times: $1+1+1=1$

This made me worry about the future maths education of my sons. To be subjected to bad maths even before they have had any maths at all...

Poor boys. And I also pitied the future maths teacher a bit.

$1+1+1=1$ – One crude attempt to describe the Trinity. Not so successful, I think.

St Patrick used a leaf of clover to explain how God can be one and three. He asked his Irish would-be converts: “How many leaves do you see?” – and to this day the clover, or similar shapes have been with us as symbols of the Trinity.

It might convince me after a few Guinness. But while I’m still sober – I must say – it doesn’t tell me anything about the nature of God.

Other traditional pictures to explain the doctrine of the Trinity are more sophisticated. They all revolve around different yet connected states of the same, sometimes incorporating a cause, or an effect.

In these pictures we can at least learn something about the inherent relationships and the differences between the persons of the Trinity.

The three persons of the Trinity have for example been likened to the source, the water and a stream.

Or the Sun, the light and the warmth.

Other people have attempted to understand the threefold nature of God in the different forms that we experience water: as ice, water, and steam.

There are numerous other pictures that try to help us to understand how God can be One and at the same time be three persons.

I tried to construct my own super up-to-date-model reflecting on the

Landesausstellung and the tricentennial celebration of the personal union.

But I must admit I hopelessly failed. I got as far as: One king, two kingdoms, and several other dominions.

Not quite Trinitarian. So I gave up. There are limits to one’s local patriotism...

One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will always struggle to understand

this. The Church Fathers have struggled. The modern professors of dogmatics are struggling, but most of all the students of theology are struggling who have to write essays and sit exams on it.

There is a story about St Augustine, who was writing a treatise on the Trinity.

St Augustine is said to have been walking along the beach where he encountered a little boy who had dug a hole in the sand – as little boys do on the beach. And into this hole the little boy was pouring water from the sea. Again and again the boy would wade into the sea, fill his bucket with water, walk back and pour it out.

“What are you doing there?” asked the saint. “I’m going to pour the whole sea into my hole!” the boy proudly answered. “But you can never achieve that! You surely cannot fit the sea into this hole,” replied Augustine. The boy replied, “And neither can you, Augustine, fit the whole Trinity into your brain”.

At that moment the boy disappeared. It appears that St Augustine had spoken to an angel.

What a wonderful picture: speaking about God is like fitting the whole ocean into one small hole.

It cannot be done. Yet it needs to be done. We have to wade patiently back into the waves again and again and keep getting the water of this ocean that is God. And we have to trust that although he appears to be vast and unknowable he is also so small and easy that we can grasp him somehow.

We get glimpses of God and of his Triune nature, when we read the Bible. It is like taking one bucket out of the whole ocean that is God.

The Biblical authors share with us some of their wisdom – and I want to give you a couple of examples.

For example in St John’s gospel Jesus says: “*I and the Father are one*” (10.30) and “*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.*” (14.9) But we also read in the same context that the Father is greater than Jesus (14.28) – the latter seems to sit

oddly with the former, but all describe a relationship that indicates identity, unity and at the same time separateness.

Another example from our 2nd reading today: At the end of St Matthew's gospel Jesus sends his disciples to be missionaries. He uses the words that we still use at our baptisms: "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" (28.19)

Here we have all three persons of the Trinity together. But we don't learn anything about their relationship. Are they one? Are they separate? It has been observed that Jesus does not talk about "names" but about one "name".

They are all connected under one name. This is the one name of God. It is a rather long name... and it gives us another glimpse into the nature of the Trinity.

In baptism this name has become our name! This opens up a completely new dimension of the Trinity: we also have a part in this complicated Trinitarian relationship.

A third example is the verse from 2 Corinthians 13.14 that I used at the beginning of the sermon: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*"

Here St Paul mentions different effects of the persons of the Trinity: grace, love and communion. But can we really separate love and grace neatly between the Father and the Son? Or communion between the Holy Spirit and Jesus?

It will not work. It cannot be done, I think.

We *should* try to understand Him with our brains. Because that's what we have got brains for. But we should also know that doing so is futile.

Eventually, we will fail and throw away our bucket in frustration.

We have to accept that the Trinity is a mystery. It is the relationship that lies at the core of God. It is the central mystery of the Christian faith. We cannot look into God, into his inner workings.

But it is something that we can approach in faith.

Last week, I was very impressed by the mechanic who fixes our old Rover. He just looked at our tyres and without opening the bonnet he was able to tell us what was wrong inside our car.

In a similar way we can learn about God in action as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In faith we experience God. From the effects that living with God has, we can recognize how God is.

I found a quote from the unknown mediaeval author of „The Cloud of Unknowing“ which I think will point us in the right direction:

„All rational beings, angels and men, possess two faculties, the power of knowing, and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God is forever unknowable. But to the second, to love, he is *completely* knowable, and that by every separate individual. This is the everlasting miracle of love.“¹

We can only so far understand the mystery of the Trinity. We get glimpses. Some ideas. Some principles.

The Biblical authors share some of their wisdom.

But even if you go through the whole Bible, you do not get a complete explanation of the Triune God.

He remains a mystery. But He lets himself be known in love, because he is love in action: the lover, the beloved and love.

We are taken into this movement of love between the persons of the Trinity.

We become part of it.

That love originates within the Trinity but it cannot just love itself. It needs somebody to love.

In the first instance this is the reason given for the existence of the Trinity: Love cannot be alone.

It needs a lover and a beloved.

¹ Quoted after Ronald Blythe, Word from Wormingford, Church Times, No 7890, 6 June 2014, p. 56. My italics.

The second instance is us: God loves us. We are the direction of his love. We are the reason for his love.

But love does not stop here. When we are taken into this movement of love, we in turn need somebody to love...

It will be our neighbour whom we love, and of course, God, whom we can love back. There will be no end of love.

We have to keep getting our little bucketfuls of water out of the ocean of love.

The more we love, the better we will understand.

Maybe the language of love, of praise and music is far more suitable to talk about God than the language of dogmatics.

Maybe we should try out Song of Songs as a prayer of praise. See how these verses can fit God:

2.16: My beloved is mine and I am his...

8.6-7: Place me like a seal over your heart,

like a seal on your arm;

for love is as strong as death, ...

It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.

Many waters cannot quench love;

rivers cannot sweep it away.

2.16: My beloved is mine and I am his...

2.4: He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.

And the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.