

Trinity Sunday – May 2008

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Often wondered what poor hapless soul ends up preaching on Trinity Sunday – at least now I know.

What is Trinity Sunday about and why do we have a Doctrine of the Trinity?

Lets take a step back and ask – why do we have doctrine at all??

CS Lewis gives a lovely explanation. He says how at the end of a talk an old RAF man told him that theology was a waste of time – he'd experienced God out in the desert and that was far more real than dry dogmas. All seemed petty and pedantic after that. Lewis said he agreed with him and didn't doubt that he had a very real experience of God. And that having had that turning to theology would be like looking at the Atlantic from the beach and then turning to a map of the sea instead. From the real thing to bits of coloured paper.

However that map was put together by hundreds of people that had actually got wet – they had really got to know the sea. They had lots of experience of the sea first had. Up close and personal. They had traveled the sea.

Having nice experiences of God on the beach is wonderful – but if you want to get to know God better and to explore your faith further – you need to get in the water. And it is not wise to do so without a map. That is where doctrine and theology help us. They give us other people's collective wisdom and experience to help us navigate as we get off the beach and go deeper with God.

The doct of the Trinity helps us to understand our God better and therefore to get to know who he is better and therefore to travel deeper into our relationship with him.

We know there are many confusing things about God. We are Christians for goodness sake – we know God came down to earth for

33 years but that God was still our Father in heaven –and then Jesus left us filled with the Holy Spirit. Not one nice god in a box type faith.

And there is plenty of Biblical evidence about it. I'm simply going to refer to 3 obvious ones:

OT.

Gen 1:26 `let us make human kind in our image – in our likeness'.

NT.

Matt 3:16 At that moment heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove..and a voice from heaven said `this is my son whom I love, with whom I am well pleased'

2 Cor 13:14 `the Grace of the Lord Jesus , the Love of God and the fellowship of the HS be with you all'.

There are many more texts pointing to the fact that God is more than one person.

One of the complications re the Trinity is that the word is not used in the Bible. We don't get Jesus neatly explaining himself in these terms. No buttoned up explanation.

So how do we come to understand this? To make sense of it? You may have thought deeply about this – I know for a fact that several people have – but most of us don't. we are happy to hang onto bits of it and to fudge the rest. I have – which is why it is no coincidence that I happen to be the hapless soul this morning - nothing like preaching on a topic to galvanise one into study. There are so many ways one could explore this and so many angles I could have taken and I feel I need to apologise before I start for everything I haven't covered.

This morning we will look at the 3 statements that make up the doctrine of the Trinity, the Biblical evidence for them, then we'll look at some unhelpful analogies and then see what the Trinity can teach us.

There are 3 statements that state clearly what we know about God and that make up the basis of this doctrine.

1. God is 3 persons.
2. Each is fully God.
3. There is one God.

Let us look at each in turn and the Biblical evidence for them.

God is 3 persons.

This means that the father is not the son, nor is he the HS. 3 distinct persons.

Start with Jesus

John 1:1 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God.' The word as we know is Jesus and the word 'with' means that Jesus was not same as God.

John 17:24 Jesus speaks to God about 'my glory – the glory you gave me because you loved me'. Jesus clearly sees himself as separate from the Father.

In 1 John we learn that Jesus is our high priest and advocate to the father. Hebrews tells us he intercedes for us. He could not be so if he were not distinguishable from the father.

Plus as mentioned earlier - we have 4 entire Gospels telling us that Jesus came and lived among us but carried on talking to the Father in heaven all the time.

So the father is not the son -

And the father is not the H.S. and neither is the son the HS.

Jesus says that 'the counsellor, the HS whom the father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and remind you of all that I have said to you'. John 14. separate entity.

Romans 8 we read that the HS also intercedes for us

Think of the great commission – 'go and baptise in the name of the Father, Son and HS' [matt 28]

And also the passages that indicate that Jesus went back to heaven to send the HS eg: john 16 – where Jesus says if he doesn't leave them the HS won't come as Jesus needs to send him.

Some say that the HS is a power or force of God – not distinct from God. But the HS is referred to as male – and a spirit would not have a gender – it would be neutral in Greek. Plus the Greek name for a counsellor or comforter is a term used for a person – and that is the term used for the HS.

The HS we are told teaches us / bear witness / prays for us/ searches / knows the thoughts of God / distributes gifts / forbids activities / speaks / grieves. These are not things that `powers' do – these are things that people do.

So God is distinct as 3 persons
Lets examine statement 2

2. Each person is fully God.

Lets accept that God is fully God - we can cope with that one - and move onto Jesus

To finish the sentence from John 1 `in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God...' Jesus is fully God and always was before the world began.

Thomas declared `my Lord and my God' in John 20. both Jesus and john approve this declaration. This is written that you too may believe the same – John tells us 2 verses later.

In Hebrews we read that Jesus is the exact representation or duplicate of God of the nature or being of God – so whatever God is or has, Jesus is/has too.

John the B said – prepare ye the way of the Lord... a highway for our God'. [Matt].

And the references go on and on.

The Holy Spirit is also fully God.

Baptising them in the name of the father and the son the HS – makes it clear that the HS is seen as equally God. You can't take out the HS and put in the Arch Angel Michael. The HS is God – the angles are not.

Acts 5 Peter asks Ananias why he lied to the HS and says he has therefore lied to God.

Paul – God's temple is where he dwells and we are God's temple because the HS dwells in us. [1 Cor]
Plus the HS gives new life to all – and that's the work of God.

So each of the persons is fully God

Now the Third statement – there is one God

The 3 persons are not only one in purpose but also in essence – God is only one being.

Deut 6 – hear oh Israel the Lord is one..

Solomon in kings - 'the lord is God there is no other'

God in Isaiah – 'I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God..' and he repeats it further in the same chapter [45].

Paul – there is one God [Tim]

Romans – God is one.

1 Cor – there is one God.

So we are left with these 3 statements clearly made in the Bible. These are if you like the facts as we know them.

Does this make it easy to understand?? – No.

Which is why thru out history we have been presented with analogies – but we need to beware of these. As each has to deny one of these statements.

Clover leaf – each leaf can only be part of the whole – not all of the whole clover – where as in the Trinity – each is fully God.

Parts of a tree [roots, trunk, branches]. Again one part cannot be the whole tree

Plus in this analogy the 3 parts are all quite different from one another.

The use of ice, water and steam. Well I have to confess to having used this in a Sunday school class - and I mean Sunday school. But it don't think any serious theological damage was done as no one was listening. But it really is not a helpful exercise. Ice, water and steam are nothing alike and do not share properties, they are not connected to each other at any point - unless one waits for water to freeze - which could be as exciting as watching paint dry - and they cannot be the other at the same time.

Farmer, mayor, elder analogy. The idea here is that one person has 3 functions - but he functions as these different things at different times. He's either acting in his capacity as one of these at any given time - not all 3. and there is no interaction in between these 3 roles - as each is played by the same man.

There are others that don't work either.

The Bible doesn't use analogies for the T. for God's characteristics yes but not for the T. maybe we shouldn't try either.

An unhelpful analogy can be more than unhelpful - it can be dangerous.

They can lead to heresies such as Modalism - there is only one God who appears to us in different forms [ie:the farmer / mayor / elder analogy]

Also failure to see the T as it is lead to Ariansim - God created Jesus and before that time he did not exist.

Or adoptionsim - that Jesus became God's son at his baptism.

to Subordinationsim - JESUS eternal and not created by God but not equal to God

Why is this so important? Well if for instance we don't accept the full deity of Jesus then how can he atone for our sins? If he's not God he can't carry the full wrath of God.

And if Jesus not fully God we would rightly doubt that he could save us so justification by faith becomes precarious.

And if Jesus not fully God what on earth are we doing worshipping him?

And how do we undermine the HS by not acknowledging him as a person of the Trinity not just a power of the father and Son? How do we limit his working in our lives?

This was about the point in which one book I was wading thru said that the Trinity 'is far beyond our ability to comprehend.' And I thought if only you had started with that statement you'd have saved me a lot of time trying. But the author Wayne Grudem, then qualifies it by saying that we are not however asked to believe a contradiction. We are not asked to believe that there is one God and there is not one God.

Or that God is 3 persons but not 3 persons.

We are asked to believe that God is 3 persons – which we can understand, and that they are each fully God. And we can also understand that there is one God.

The problem is fitting these 3 together. How can there be 3 beings, each fully God and yet one undivided being? But this is not a contradiction – it is a paradox. It is a mystery. It is beyond us. This is the point where we respectively accept that God is God and if we could fully understand him he would not be God – in 3 persons or otherwise.

So we know the Trinity is complex and we know it's a paradox and we know we need to be careful not to misunderstand it. Not terrible helpful sermon really .

We need something more positive!

But then Grudem does give us something. He looks at the differences in God the Father, the Son and the HS. This gives us something concrete. Because although they share attributes, they are distinct

from one another. They differ in the way they relate to the world and in the way they relate to one another.

Firstly in the way they relate to the world..

In creation –

the father spoke the words to bring the universe into being. Jesus the word - carried out the decrees. And God said - we read in Genesis – and thru him all things were made – we read in John 1 – that is Jesus bringing God’s words to life. The HS was hovering over the waters – sustaining and manifesting God’s presence in his creation. Team effort. All clear roles.

In redemption – the father planned the redemption of humanity and sent the son to accomplish it. Jesus died for us – not the Father or the HS. The HS was then sent by the F and the S to regenerate us spiritually and to empower us for service. Again a team effort and 3 clear roles.

And then the way the 3 relate to each other –

The father and son relate as a father and son – the father directs and the son obeys. [this is an eternal relationship – the son doesn’t one day grow up and move on - 1 Cor makes this clear]

The HS obeys both and yet he too sends the son into the wilderness. Therefore though equal in attributes they differ in their relationship to creation and though equal in deity the son and HS are subordinate in their roles.

Equal in being but subordinate in role.

We battle with that. Which is partly why we battle with the T. And this is where the Trinity teaches us about ourselves.

we battle with that because for us if you carry priority you are seen as superior. If you are the one with the power – you are seen as more important.

But if God is this way and we are made in his image..... we need to adjust our world views to be more in line with God’s.

Andrew Vaughan used the trinity in a recent sermon on loving community. Because here we have such a loving community, where there are 3 distinct roles, where 2 are in subordination – but where there is no inequality.

I've borrowed the SLIDE he used to demonstrate this. Its an icon by Rublev done in 1425.

It expresses the Trinity in silence - which is helpful as words often complicate things further.

Apart from differences in the colour of clothing the 3 are identical. Each head submissively inclined to toward one of the others. None assumes an imperial attitude. Atmosphere of love and freedom and rest. Intimate communion. Sense of oneness achieved primarily thru the gentle engagement of the eyes.

Imagine how loving our communities would be if we understood this and lived by it?

Imagine the transformation in families, marriages and work places not to mention politics - if we understood that less power does not mean less worth. Imagine the transformation in us as individuals if we could know that our worth is not based on our power.

Last week Tim talked about the HS and our gifts. He warned us to watch out for pride and jealousy as we exercise these gifts. Imagine if we did not need to feel that we had to be the best in order to be equal – jealousy would then have no place.

We would be able to play our part without fear of insignificance. We would not have evaluate ourselves against others. Our egos would not have to be massaged in any way because we would be content with knowing that we worthy as we are.

God does not want us to pit ourselves against one another. He lives in loving community and intends us to too. If we could put our energy and gifts into building loving communities in our families, marriages, work place and churches how much happier would we be, how much more effective would we be and how much more would we be able to play our part in God's plan for redemption.

We would have much more forward thrust if we worked together. Never clearer than in the churches. And in our local govt at the moment where so much energy and time and rate payers money is going into various political parties asserting themselves. This not how God intended them to govern.

Now I know this is obvious: wouldn't the world be a nicer place if we all got along. But the point this morning is that we would all get along better if we didn't feel the need to assert ourselves and compete. And our example and inspiration for this is what we see in the Trinity – and it's our encouragement as well. Because if we are made in God's image – then it is possible.

So – to sum up..

God is 3 persons – each is fully God – there is one God.

The doc of the Trinity is more about correcting misperceptions than making nice tidy theology. Its like a map of the sea that says beware don't go there – or you'll sink. It leaves us with a paradox and the mystery of a vast sea that is awesome and cannot be fully known. But knowing where not to go gives us the guidelines within which it is safe to go. And with misperceptions aside we can explore God – adding our experiences of him to this framework.

And the doctrine of the Trinity also teaches us about loving community. Loving unthreatened equal communities where the role played does not indicate the worth of the person. Communities in which people are free of jealousy and egos , free to let the person of the HS lead them into their part in God's plan.