

1. Are you baffled by the idea of the Trinity? Is it just theological tech-speak coming out of an early church debate too stuck in the realms of Greek philosophical thought? Or does it have something to say to us today? Does it make a difference to the way we live?

Well, if you are baffled by it, then this is good news! Why would you expect the Creator of the Universe, of all that is, to be easy to understand? If it was all so simple, then surely we would be more powerful than God? If we don't have mystery at the heart of our understanding of God, we are lacking. And so is God.

For me, something I find helpful about the idea of the Trinity is that, because it is so baffling, it seems it speaks of an authentic experience of God that those early Christian followers had had. They were sure of the experience, it made no logical sense, but they had to battle on with it because it was TRUE. They did not suppress this completely baffling experience they had had. And the only way they could explain it ended up in their doctrine of the Trinity.

2. Trinity Sunday provides a risky opportunity: there is so much opportunity for heresy!

I remember the first sermon I gave, and it came on Trinity Sunday so I had to battle with the idea then! I explored various analogies and how they might help: for example, water (because it exists in three phases as ice, water or steam). Or a three-legged stool: take one leg away, the stool falls over; but adding a fourth leg is not necessary for stability (the engineers amongst you will like this!). The trouble is, both analogies I now realise are wrong and unhelpful!

The water analogy tells us that at any one time, God is only one thing. You can't be ice and steam at the same time. Wrong – the Trinity says God is all three persons all the time! The stool analogy is a bit better – but ultimately fails for the same reason as the water analogy.

At the heart of the idea of the Trinity is a humanly unsolvable conundrum which our three readings highlight for us today.....

3. The OT reading is the call of the great prophet Isaiah. It is an awe-inspiring vision he has of the heavenly courts, during which he receives his call to be a prophet.

Its mystical, mysterious, other-worldly and strange. Isaiah – having the privilege of insight into this 'heavenly court' where God is deliberating – is overcome by a sense of awe and humility. 'Woe is me! I am lost...' he cries, because what he sees is utterly good and utterly powerful. It is like he is standing too close to a fire where has no right to exist. That is God. God is utterly different, beyond our realms, too good to be true; we shrivel and bow in reverence. 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts' the messengers sing around him. God is so beyond us, so good, actually we can't know him..... Ah! But.....

4.You can know Him! Didn't Jesus show us, and say, exactly that!?

This was the first part of the conundrum for the early followers of Jesus. Jesus appeared amongst them – flesh and blood, truly human – apparently not God (he was right there in front of their eyes!) yet the only way they could explain his being, his actions was that he was God.

Our reading from John's gospel is an example. Nicodemus – a learned thinker – comes because he is confused (v2): ***'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'*** Help me out in this conundrum, he is asking! But Jesus doesn't help him! In fact, he further complicates it for Nicodemus. He says, ***'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'***

Jesus does not directly answer the question about who he himself is. Instead, he says the only way to understand it is by 'being born again' i.e. letting the Spirit (who?!) move through you.

5. So now we have a real conundrum! We started thinking God was entirely beyond, unknowable and too good to be comprehensible. But the disciples are then challenged: Jesus is right amongst them as a fellow human. And now Jesus himself says: God's Spirit moves where it will IN and AROUND you.

This is what Paul grapples with in his letter to the Romans. We could have assumed that maybe, after Jesus appeared no more, it was just the disciples memory of Jesus – Jesus' legacy – which was spurring them on. For any of you who have lost a loved one, you will understand this. A reaction I have had since my father died recently – because I so loved and respected him – we all did – is to say 'how can we live his legacy well?' I think that is a natural reaction to death of a loved one.

But Paul, and others, don't hint that this is what they felt the Spirit was. The satirical magazine Punch once had a 3-picture cartoon. The first picture showed a military dictator on a balcony saying to a crowd, 'In fulfilment of my promise at the time of the coup, I am now handing over the civilian rule.' In the second picture, he leaves the balcony. In the third picture, he is back on the balcony in a civilian suit! But there is no hint Paul or the early disciples thought the Spirit was just Jesus revisited or Jesus' legacy (which would maybe have made most sense).

Paul says (8.15), ***'When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'*** Paul is saying our ability to relate to God is the Spirit working in us, but it's not Jesus!

6. Who cares about all these dilemmas? How does this make any difference to how you will walk out of here and live this week? Because the first thing this all says is God is love.

The idea of the Trinity finds love at the core of God, in God's very essence. Because the three persons are firmly held together, in a bond of love. If God was a single, unitarian God and we said, 'God is love' it would be a leap in the dark. And in fact, we could ask, 'how could God be love if God had nothing to love before the creation?' You can't be love if you cannot act your love. So you might then say, 'God created the creation so that God had something to love!' Trouble is, that sounds a bit needy! And it says, without the creation, God cannot truly love. But God is love in God's essence of the Trinity.

7. But there is more to this. H A Williams, a great thinker and priest at Trinity College Cambridge during the last century, said this:

'I suspect that the doctrine of the Trinity was felt to meet two threats to which every human is subject..., each of which...would destroy us. I notice that a great deal of what we do is concerned with meeting and overcoming these threats, and that this is a matter of instinct and constant contrivance..... The two threats are the threat of isolation on the one hand, and the threat of absorption on the other. Each is a potential murderer.'

Cosmic loneliness is a grim threat. Spend too long by yourself and you will know it. 'I am completely alone and unknown and inconsequential' it says. The Trinity says you are never alone: Jesus is one like you, and the Spirit works within you and draws you into the divine dance of God's love.

But absorption is an equally grim prospect and fear. If you are head over heels in love, maybe you feel ecstatic and happy to just 'let yourself entirely go.' But long term, when reality sets in, you know you need to hold onto yourself – your true self – you need to be respected for who you are and have your own space, even with your greatest lover. The Trinity says that each person is distinct, even within the bonds of the deepest love. God will never expect you to lose your own character, your unique you, and become some cookie-cutter nobody.