

'The Trinity – not another explanation!'

Sermon for Trinity Sunday by Mark Pilgrim

Matthew 28.16-20

To begin with: a story. At a Confirmation Service the bishop decides in his sermon to quiz the teenagers he is about to confirm. So he asks "Who can tell me what the Trinity is?" They all look at their shoes in the way that teenagers do. So he calls on one young person, who mumbles a reply, in the way that teenagers do. The bishop says, "I'm sorry, I didn't understand that." The young person sighs, in the way that teenagers do, and replies, only slightly louder, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The bishop, wanting them to speak up, says, "I'm sorry, I still didn't understand." And the young person, rolling their eyes, in the way that teenagers do, says loudly and clearly, "You're not supposed to understand the Trinity. It's meant to be a mystery – even to you!"

Let's go with from the teenager this morning. Instead of trying to explain the mystery of the Trinity and de-construct its complexity, rather than attempt to unpack the Trinity, let's think about what a community of people believing and following the Trinity might look like.

David Lose, the Lutheran theologian I learn from frequently, suggests that a Trinitarian congregation is 'called and sent by the Spirit to bear witness to Jesus Christ for the sake of the world God created and loves.' Do you notice something about the order in that description? The Spirit is mentioned first, then the Son, then the Father/Creator. David Lose calls this 'the Trinity backwards': as a way to explore and develop our understanding on the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, I suggest it's a very good direction in which to travel. As Jesus often did in the parables, looking at the Trinity by way of Trinitarian congregations is a way of telling it slant – coming at the mystery of the Trinity obliquely, from an unusual angle...giving us the chance, perhaps, to see things afresh or for the first time. So, what does a Trinitarian congregation look like in the flesh?

We can begin to find out from our second reading. Because here, in the final paragraph of Matthew's Gospel, we have the commissioning of the disciples to 'go out and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Those first disciples were the first Trinitarian community – and what a lot we can learn from Matthew's account when we take a good look.

The first thing we can see is that the community isn't in a central or important place. Where were they? 'the eleven disciples,' says Matthew 'went to Galilee'. This first Trinitarian community was in the sticks – on the edge...not located in a place of power. Galilee was a high risk area for faithful Jews – a place where they could be contaminated and infected by the scourge of Roman and other idol worship and by contact with nearby Samaritans. Yet even here, in this compromising and challenging environment, there is a high spot, a mountain top, where the faithful could encounter and communicate with the God who was sending them. And, on that mountain, Matthew says – with huge daring and breaking all the rules of Jewish law and tradition – the disciples worshipped....what...who? Matthew daringly says 'the disciples worshipped him' – the resurrected Jesus. What an amazing signpost to the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity! Matthew describes the disciples worshipping Jesus as Yahweh – as God's self. But then Matthew says in the very next breath: 'they worshipped him; but some doubted'. 'But some doubted'.

Isn't that an amazing detail to include straight after this revolutionary, this ground-breaking phrase 'they worshipped him' – 'but some doubted'! What's going on??? What on earth is going on? Here the disciples are, with the evidence of Jesus' resurrection before them in plain sight, a privilege which only they and a very few alongside them had access to...they worship Jesus as God...'but some doubted'. Still doubt and uncertainty creep into frail human minds, into faltering human imagination. Even in that climactic, never to be repeated divine moment..., what happens? Doubt creeps in! In a moment I'll share with you why I think this is actually good news. But before I do that, let me fill you in on a couple of conversations I've been part of this week.

The first conversation took place at Morning Prayer on Thursday. Six of us were discussing that challenging bit in Luke's Gospel where Jesus comes over all harsh and judgmental. Jesus is inviting people to follow him. One says, 'Let me go and bury my father first' and another says, 'Let me say goodbye to those at home'. To both, Jesus gives a dusty answer: 'Let the dead bury the dead' and 'no one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'. Collectively, the six of us in Morning Prayer in effect said 'Ouch! That's not the forgiving Jesus we know and love. That's the narky Jesus who tipped over the money changers tables. With friends like him, who needs enemies?!' It left us then – and leaves us now - with the serious question 'Who can – how can anyone – follow Jesus if the demands are that high and uncompromising?' But then we went on to tell two stories from our own experience.

One was of, indeed, delaying getting involved in a mission project in order to spend time with family: the outcome of this, though, was still 'blessing'. The failure to respond as wholeheartedly and as uncompromisingly as theoretically possible did not, in the long run, seem to be a barrier to future ministry and mission. The thing is we'll just never know what would have happened if the initial response had been more sacrificial!

The second story was of daring to spend two years in an uncomfortable place, having to be ready to pack up and leave with a minimum of possessions at short notice. This sacrifice of possessions and freedom had actually led to a sense of liberation and spiritual freedom for which the person was glad years later.

Whether our obedience is full bloodied or patchy, the result seems to be: God remains with us. God still works in and through us. Our waywardness may be a hindrance but it's not a total blockage – it creates a detour for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The second conversation I want to share with you took place at Helen and Simon Collins' Zoom Bible Study on Wednesday evening. There we were marvelling at how on earth the amazing and frankly bizarre story of a Galilean Jew experiencing resurrection and being acclaimed as the human face of the God of Creation could gain traction twenty or thirty years later among people in Greek towns like Colossi and Corinth. Given there was no filming of the resurrection or of Jesus' life or teaching, no social media to communicate his message – just word of mouth and a few papyrus letters to tell the story, how on earth did the Christian message survive and thrive so that we and people around the world can talk about it and believe today? Only one satisfactory solution came to mind: it has to be the work and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And it's this, paradoxically, that makes the doubts we entertain and the fact that we fail to respond wholeheartedly and perfectly to the invitation to be disciples 'good news'. The point about the bringing in of God's kingdom is... that it is God's kingdom. It isn't, can't and mustn't be our kingdom. We have to leave room for God. God has to have room left for God. In the end, the bringing in of God's kingdom is all God's work – but God will not do it without us! God needs our faltering, fractured and failing involvement to get the task done!

Why? Why can and will God do it only with our involvement, our help? Because that is the nature of love. That is the nature of the Trinity. That is the nature of the relationship of love which is at the heart of our understanding of God. Love wants the best for 'the other'. God wants the best for us, the creatures of God's making. And the best that we can do, the best that we can be is to take part, to engage in some way or other, in the building of the kingdom of love that the Holy Trinity reveals is the Kingdom of God.

So, St Peter's, let's keep striving to be a Trinitarian congregation. Like that first Trinitarian congregation we both worship God in Christ...and we falter and fail. Let's recognise and indeed celebrate that we all have and need to recognise our doubts and limitations. Only by doing this will we leave room for God the Creator, God the Redeemer and God the Sustainer to do God's work in, around and through us.

To God, who is both mystery and Trinity, may all might, power and praise be given, now and in all eternity. Amen.