

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Bishop Karen

One of the well-known films of the 1990s was 'Nuns on the Run,' starring Robbie Coltrane and Eric Idle. It portrays the lives of two men who are running away from the police and a gang who were hoping to murder them. As they are running for safety, they find themselves behind the closed doors of an abbey basement amidst all the habits and veils – the fact that they were men did not matter, as the veils covered the sides of their faces and their necks. The Abbey specialises in education and these two 'nuns' find themselves teaching! Eric Idle lands the job of teaching Catholic Studies to a group of young women studying the mystery of the Holy Trinity. One of the girls raises her hand and asks him what the meaning of the Trinity is. After serious thought, he tells her that the Trinity is like a shamrock: small, green and in three bits! He leaves the room!

When I was young the Trinity was always referred to as a shamrock because it symbolises a threefold aspect; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Without the Father, there would be no Son and there would be no Holy Spirit. There are other analogies with which we are all familiar.

By Trinity, we mean to say that God is three in one. God is fully God when God created and still creates the universe. God is fully God when God lives and still lives in the presence and person of Jesus Christ and God is fully God when God lives and still lives in the presence and person of the Holy Spirit.

One little boy came home from Sunday school and told his mum that the Vicar has said that God was everywhere. 'That is true', his mother responded. 'Is he in the oven when it is hot?' the boy asked. 'Yes' replied his mother. 'How about in the cupboard?' 'Yes' replied his mother. 'How about the fridge when the door is closed, and the light is off?' 'Oh yes' retorted his mother. 'How about the cake tin?' asked the boy, as he took the lid off the tin. 'Well, I suppose so.' answered his mother. The boy slammed the tin shut and announced triumphantly 'Got him!' Of course, his mother had a lot more explaining to do!

As humorous as this story may be, there is some truth behind it. Often, we view God in similar ways to this boy. We think God is small enough to be packed into a tidy package, which we can control and understand completely. We want God of our own making, on our own terms. We want God sanitized and tamed.

Trinity Sunday reminds us that God is much more than this. It reminds us that we will never be able to capture God, to put God in a neat package of our own making. God will always be more than our words and doctrines, our beliefs and expressions, our purest intentions and actions. There will always be a mystery about God, which is tremendous in the sense that it is so awesome and overwhelming we are unable to grasp it.

If we think we have had it hard these last few months as Church, then the next months are going to be even harder. The church has adapted amazingly well and fast to new ways of communicating the Christian faith and discovering interacted ways to encourage people in their worship, fellowship, prayer and social action. In some ways the release from church buildings has been a welcome respite from all that they entail. There has been time for creativity and pastoral care, amidst all the sadness and concern for personal health, the vulnerable, sick and bereaved. Therefore, the move to inhabit those buildings again is quite daunting and the reimagining of Church quite stressful. Currently I am meeting two types of clergy, those who are planning some quite a strategic return to prayer and worship in our buildings as it was before lockdown, and planning to build on the success of digital media in various ways, and those who are taking each day as it comes, and who are happy

to follow and respond as and when the future is a little clearer. Neither of these two responses are wrong, the key is to not have things too sewn up that we miss the new thing which God may want us to be or do.

Christian faith is not about explanations, it is about experience. It is about a relationship with the living God. The doctrine of the Trinity is important, but its importance is not in whether you believe it or not. The importance is in what sort of God it is trying to describe.

As we think about the future it will help us to revisit the fourth century and see the argument that led to the doctrine in the first place. On the surface the debate was about whether Jesus was divine, however the underlying question then was what God was like.

Arius, a Libyan presbyter, ascetic, and priest in Alexandria, Egypt, rejected the idea that Jesus was God because of the one-dimensional way in which he saw God. For Arius God was so far above us humans that God did not need to communicate himself in anyway. God was exalted, holy, pure, absolute, glorious and the idea of such a God lowering himself to become personally involved with his creatures was demeaning and blasphemous. God on high, wholly other, untouched by our petty concerns does not need us anyway.

However, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, took issue with this way of thinking. Being self-contained, superior and distant is not the essential feature of the divinity he said. We human beings tend to worship independence before we will worship God. Humans are afraid of dependency. Therefore the essential defining feature of God was not utter independence, but self-giving, a love that gives and gives and gives and Athanasius argued that this self-giving occurs even within the Godhead – that between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit there is a mutual self-giving, and that self-giving looks outwards and expresses itself not professionally distanced but in a totally unprofessional nearness to others, including us human beings.

God gets totally involved with us loving, nurturing, longing, craving our response and our giving in return. God is the Spirit who moves through us with every breath, who whispers into our ear, who prompts us and cajoles us towards holiness.

Athanasius accused Arius of having a sterile God who doesn't generate, doesn't shine, doesn't communicate, doesn't reveal. A God who sits in isolated splendour, useless and irrelevant and passionless. He argued that God made known in Jesus is dynamic, involved, always busy relating, cherishing, shining, revealing, expressing, giving. He is a God who can know joy and pain; a God who longs for us to return the love we are shown; a God who hurts when we fail to respond and who grieves when we damage ourselves in the process. Needless to say, Athanasius won the debate.

And part of the result is our recitation week by week 'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.'

We do well to consider this debate as we move forward. There is no shortage of people who see God as highly exalted, distant and uninvolved, and there are many people who want to quickly step in to fill the human void as a result, to quickly fix things, to anticipate every next move, to design a future church in every detail.

God instead is a passionate Spirit and created us for relationship. Indeed, God needs us to respond to God's love and begin to give in return as passionately as God gives to us.

God whose voice thundered across the chaos in creation, whose very word is enough to bring into being that which was not before, is the same God who cries 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you would have let me love you like a mother hen loves her chicks.'

God who hangs helpless, bleeding to death on a crude wooden cross is the same God who shakes the earth, bursting open prison doors and shatters the manacles from the feet of prisoners and who can work miracles today.

God who brings transformation in the lives of those who commit themselves to walking in the Way, is the same God who stands for justice, and enables the vulnerable, the outcast and the voiceless to speak truth to power and work for peace.

The mystery of the mighty God of the cosmos, the mystery of the vulnerable God who walked amongst us, and the mystery of the God nudging and whispering within us is all the same mystery, the same God. And if nothing else, then that means that we had better not get too fixated on one aspect of the experience of God in going forward and start suggesting that it proves other images of God are wrong. God will always be bigger, more diverse and more surprising than we can get our heads around.

That is why Church will continue to be so important in days to come. In recognising our inter-dependence, God who is characterised by love and self-giving, needs us to continue to learn to love and give and be in community with one another.

If we want to be a people of light and truth in our world, a people who bring hope and creative change to a world in desperate need, then we must begin by ourselves journeying into the welcoming heart of the only one who can offer that hope and change. That is the power of love that burns unquenchably in the dynamic relationship of that reality and mystery, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

May the power and the mystery go before us, to show us the way,
Shine above us to lighten our world,
Lie beneath us to bear us up,
Walk with us and give us companionship,
And glow and flow within us to bring us joy. Amen