

Morningside

11/06/2017

Trinity Sunday

In this week's church notices there is mention of Autumn Lectures, focussing on inter-faith conversations. During this year Dr Browning will attend some inter-faith gatherings as Moderator of the General Assembly. He will meet some people he has met before and will have pleasant conversation with friends old and new. Gradually there will be some separation among the different guests. For the Christians and the Muslims and the Jews present will find that they share something very important. They agree that there is no god but God. God is One and there is none other. It is an unusual thing to say. Most ancient people believed in many gods; so do lots of modern people. Buddhists don't believe in any god. And in Scotland, the least religious part of the United Kingdom, more than half of us say they have no religion at all.

So Christians, Muslims and Jews are unusual, swimming against the tide, when they say that they believe in one God. We ought to be more alive than we are to the central matter we share with Islam and Judaism – and with no others – which is the belief that there is no god but God. On this Trinity Sunday, when we struggle with what can possibly be meant by the idea of a God who is one in three and three in one, we will drown in unfathomable depths of complexity unless we are absolutely clear that Christians believe in one God, and there is no god but God.

But at this very point, just when we think we have found some serious agreement among Christians, Jews and Muslims, everything falls apart. For the imam says, "Nonsense! You Christians do not believe, as we Muslims do, in one God. You believe in three gods: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". And the rabbi says, "Nonsense! You Christians do not believe, as we Jews do, in one God. You believe in three gods: the

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". Even those who seemed to be on the same side as us tell us we have got it wrong. So what is Christian faith saying about God as one but three in one?

Remember what we have agreed already. Anything to be said about the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit must be said in the context of the conviction that there is one God; and must be heard in the context of the conviction that there is one God. No backing down from that.

So where does talk of "three" come? What is Trinity Sunday about? The teaching about the Holy Trinity has been at the centre of so much argument and scholarship and hymn-writing since the early days of the church that it is impossible to summarise it briefly. Instead I have for you this morning just one way of looking at what "one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" might mean.

The one true God is the God we know as Father. Think of the Father above us. We heard an excerpt this morning of that breathtaking, awe-inspiring passage with which the Bible opens. Genesis chapter 1 is a creation poem written to open your eyes to the beauty of the world around, to open your mind to the mystery which lies behind all life, and to open your heart to the wonder and majesty of the creator himself.
*All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small
All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.*

Creator of the whole world, and the one who gave you life. Judge of the whole world, and the one who judges your life. The one who loved the whole world into existence and who loves you by name. The one to whom Jesus prayed as His heavenly Father who knows our needs. The one God, God above us.

The one true God is the God we know as Son. Think of the Son and brother beside us. Jesus, born at Bethlehem: look at him and there you

see God. Jesus, crucified at Calvary: look at him and there you see God. Jesus, putting his hands on the eyes of a blind man and healing him: look at him and there you see God. Jesus, reaching out to gather in all those left behind by life: look at him and there you see God.

Jesus, God the Son, our brother. When Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest", that is the voice of God speaking to you. When Jesus says, "do to others as you would have them do to you". When Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions....I go to prepare a place for you", that is the voice of God speaking to you. When Jesus says, "It is better to give than to receive", that is the voice of God speaking to you. God the Son, beside you; your companion on the way. The one God, God beside us.

The one true God, the God we know as Holy Spirit. Think of the Spirit within us. There is a hymn that was very popular a few years ago
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
God the Spirit within us.

Last Sunday in church was the Day of Pentecost. The Holy spirit coming to the followers of Jesus in wisdom and in power. Sometimes very faint, if you feel God within you challenging your conscience, calling you to live a gentler purer life...Sometimes very faint, if you feel God within you forgiving a sense of guilt that has weighed you down for years....Sometimes very faint, if you feel God within you giving your weak hands and weak heart the strength to face some dreadful challenge which lies ahead of you.... And maybe not always so faint. The one god, God within us.

God is one. The one God, God the Father above us, God the Son beside us, God the Spirit within us. God above us, God beside us, God within us. Trinity Sunday in one sentence.

But to make that sentence live, you must come with me last weekend. Last weekend I was at the Festival Theatre. It was Scottish Opera's production of La Boheme. Maybe you were there too. If I were a theatre critic my review would read simply "Wow!" But I am not a theatre critic, so, instead, as I wallowed in the romantic luxury of the opera I thought about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. And I thought two things.

I thought that much of the really important stuff in life is too deep for words. If you tell the story of La Boheme in words – poor Rodolfo meets poor Mimi, they fall in love, Mimi is ill, she dies – that does not get anywhere near what the opera is and what it is about. Words cannot explain beauty or tragedy. In the same way, to say God is one but God is three does not get anywhere near the mystery and the wonder and the beauty that is the nature of God. All these thin words can do are to point us to meaning and being far deeper and richer than theological sentences. The wonder of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

And my other thought about La Boheme and Trinity Sunday is this. The energy and the pathos of the opera comes from its love story. And maybe the teaching about God as Trinity is a way of telling of the whole mystery and energy and beauty of God is a love story. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Spirit and the Spirit loves the Father....and so on. Even within the very being of God – the one God – there is love and loving. And from that love and loving bursts forth the love that will yet heal you and save the world.