

ADDRESS 31 May 2015

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6. 1-8	A vision of God
Psalms 29	The voice of the LORD
Romans 8.12-17	Led by the Spirit
John 3.1-17	Jesus and Nicodemus

Reading the Athanasian creed shows that theology, like any other branch of knowledge, can be very precise. Let us pray,

Blessed Lord Jesus, help us to know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly day by day.

This prayer was written by the English saint, Richard of Chichester, but most of us know it from the Broadway musical *Godspell*. I say it often, especially when I am struggling with some obscure point of theology. The core of Christianity may be simple, but it is the most intellectually complex and demanding of all the great faiths, because it comes out of so many people's experience of the living God over so many centuries.

This is the fourth year in a row that I have been invited to give the address on Trinity Sunday from this pulpit, but theologians have been speaking and writing about the Trinity for centuries, so there is much, much more that can be said. I won't need to repeat myself.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not stated in the Bible, but it is derived from the Bible, as a formula to express Biblical truth about the nature and being of God. So there is a wide choice of texts to be read on Trinity Sunday – today the lectionary gives us Isaiah's vision of the majesty of God the Father, and Jesus' discussion of the Son's mission on earth, and Paul's call for us to be led by the Spirit in making decisions in our daily lives. By doing this, we fulfil our destiny as children of God. All of these passages help us to come to a richer understanding of the nature of God.

The Catholic Encyclopaedia calls the Athanasian creed *a short, clear exposition of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation*. We should be glad we were not asked to read a long exposition.

The creed was issued sometime in the 5th century to try to settle centuries of bitter controversy about the nature of God and the precise relationship between the persons of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. If the Father is God, and the Son is God and the Spirit is God, how can Christians be said to worship one God? The answer is because we worship one God in three Persons, or with three different persons, or with three different roles, as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. This is the very foundation of our faith.

The creed was named after St Athanasius, the 4th century patriarch of Alexandria, who suffered years of humiliation and persecution for insisting that the Son is equal to the Father in his essence, although he was subject to the Father in his earthly role as our Redeemer and brother. Or, as the Creed puts it, *equal to the Father as touching his Godhead, but inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood.*

15 centuries later, in the 20th C, some theologians began to question this long-accepted teaching. They pointed to texts such as Jesus himself saying to Nicodemus, *The Father is greater than I*, in the Gospel according to John (14.28), and saying to the Father, *See, I have come to do your will*, in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 10.9 quoted from Psalm 40.8). They also noted that several verses in the King James Version which speak of the equality of the Father and the Son had been removed from modern translations of the New Testament, because they were not supported by ancient manuscripts. So they returned to the teachings of some of the early fathers, that Jesus was, by nature, a lesser being than the Father and therefore subordinate to him.

These 20th C writers may well be confusing what the Athanasian creed carefully distinguishes – the nature of Jesus and the earthly role of Jesus. Here is an analogy from business, like all analogies it should not be taken too far, but it illustrates the main point of the creed. For example, Marty is the general manager of a division in her company, so she has people subordinate to her. In turn, she reports to the CEO, so she is her subordinate, and the CEO in turn reports to the Board, so she is their subordinate. There is a hierarchy of role. But all these men and women are equal as persons – they are subject to the same company policies and procedures, and one of the jobs of the HR manager is to make sure that everyone in the company is treated with equal respect, and is not harassed or bullied, or made to feel less valuable than anyone else.

In 1977 the American Orthodox Presbyterian scholar George W Knight III took the renewed debates about the Trinity even further by linking the Father-Son relationship to the man-woman relationship. He quoted three New Testament texts which teach that women are to be subordinate to men in marriage and in the church, and argued that, just as women are subordinate to men, so the Son is subordinate to the Father. Other scholars began to argue the other way, just as the Son is subordinate to the Father, so women need to be subordinate to men.

Dr Kevin Giles of Ridley College in Melbourne published a counter-text, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*. He supported the Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity and argued that the relationship between the Father and the Son has nothing to do with the relationship between men and women, in the home or in the church. He is no longer at Ridley, but continues to argue for the Athanasian position, whenever and wherever he can.

Other scholars, in this diocese and elsewhere, avoid the term 'subordination' and speak of the role of women in the home and in the church as 'complementary' rather than 'subordinate'. They argue that men and women are 'equal but different', without making sure that different roles are in fact considered equally important, just as some of the various current proposals for paid parental leave are opposed on the basis that they appear to favour working mothers over stay-at-home mothers. In the church, men and women need to be seen as equal, whatever their particular role. As the archdeacon for Women's Ministry in this diocese has written, *It is imperative . . . that we explain clearly and sensitively what the great biblical doctrine of headship and submission is, and how it translates into loving, thoughtful practice.* (Narelle Jarrett, 2 November 2008).

The place of women in the church is one of the two key issues which currently divide the Anglican communion, in particular. In more catholic dioceses, which elevate the role of the priest above the role of the lay person, and insist that the church is hierarchical rather than democratic, women are more likely to be priested than in dioceses like our own, which stress the Biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2.9) and see all forms of ministry as complementing each other.

Most theologians and most clergy agree that the Scriptures contain history and poetry as well as theology, and that some commandments like, *You shall not put on a garment made of two different materials* (Leviticus 19.19) are outdated or cultural, but others like *You shall not commit adultery* (Exodus 20.14, Deut. 5.18) are eternal, but they cannot always agree on which is which.

For example, the first letter to Timothy teaches that no woman should teach or have authority over a man, she is to keep silent. (I Timothy 2.12). However, Archbishop Glen Davies has said that, in this diocese, each rector is free to decide the policy for his own parish. So you find some people changing parishes, or leaving the church altogether, because the rector will not allow women to preach, and some people changing parishes or leaving the church because the rector will. There are similar differences in other dioceses –my son, whom many of you know, was forced to give up his parish in Brisbane, because he allowed a woman to preach. The majority of his congregations were opposed, but he had no choice, really, because the woman was his regional bishop. So he is now a priest of the Episcopal Church of the United States; he is the assistant priest in a parish whose rector is a woman. He is her equal in status, but subordinate in role.

Recently the *Sydney Morning Herald* has published two articles which claim that Christian teachings encourage domestic violence or at least allow perpetrators or victims to make excuses for it. This is certainly not Biblical teaching. The articles were based on a media release by a so-called progressive Christian group, based in Queensland. I rang the leader of the group and asked for a copy of the release and found, surprise, surprise, that the *Herald* had taken one or two sentences in the release out of context and based their articles on those.

So what are we to make of these differing views? Let me suggest three basic principles – which I have summarised as LOVE, LEARN and LISTEN.

Some people become angry with people who have different views from their own; they find them hard to love; even impossible to love. Yet, as Peter has been reminding us, Sunday by Sunday, in his exposition of the letters of the Apostle John, love is the primary commandment of the Christian faith, *This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another* (1 John 3.11). So we must keep loving people whose view we can't agree with, and focus on Jesus' teaching as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Matt. 5.44) or, go even further, as recorded in the Gospel according to Luke, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you*. Pray for them **and** help them, when you can.

Second, we must LEARN. All the great religions have a similar problem with their Scriptures – they were written in another time, in another culture, in another language. Even the most informed opinions differ on which passages in the Bible are historical/descriptive and which are normative, for all time. So we need to study them carefully and reverently and be prepared to agree to differ.

Too many Christians think that their faith demands nothing more than coming to church once a week. Even in this parish, only a few take up the many other opportunities we have to worship God and to learn more about the Divine nature – the midweek service, Bible studies, the Taizé service, Christian meditation, and more. The more we love God, the more we want to learn more about his Divine nature; and the more we learn about God's nature, the more we come to love God, and the more we learn to love other people, even the people we don't agree with. We may even learn to be humble enough to see that sometimes they may be right and we may be wrong.

Third, we must LISTEN to what the Bible says, in total, and not rely on one or two texts to support our own views. As Shakespeare observed, *The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose*.

Connections today includes a four-part Scriptural sequence we might consider, in the context of God's unique revelation of himself in Jesus. **[1]** God created men and women as equals, because both of them were created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27); **[2]** when paradise was lost (Genesis 3.16) patriarchy was one of the evils which came into the world; **[3]** when Christ returns, paradise will be restored (Acts 3.21 *et al*) so that this equality will be restored; **[4]** in the meantime, Christian believers, as citizens of heaven, (Philippians 3.20 *et al*) must relate to each other as equals, no-one being regarded as a lesser being than another, whatever their gender, or their role, or their age, or their race, just as none of the persons of the Trinity is any less divine than the others. The world would be a better place if **everyone** did this. So Christians need to set a good example. And we can, in the power of the Holy Trinity. #