

ADDRESS**11 June 2017****Trinity Sunday**

Exodus 34.1-8 Moses makes new tablets
 Song of 3YM 29-34 (Apocryphal additions to Daniel)
 2 Cor. 13.11-13 Paul's final greetings
 Matthew 28.16-20 Commissioning of the disciples

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear
 and to understand your Word, and
 open our hearts to do your will. We
 ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

You will have noticed that today's Gospel reading is the same one that we had two Sundays ago, on the Sunday after the Ascension. The canon of the New Testament was determined several centuries before the doctrine of the Trinity was defined, so there is no specific teaching about the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. Yet the understanding of God as unity in plurality is as old as some of the oldest parts of the Jewish Scriptures, where the plural word *Elohim* is used of the one God more than 23 hundred times, along with 23 other words.

In every generation, people who have had an experience of God struggle to put their understanding of the Divinity into human language. Today's Epistle and Gospel are the two short passages in the New Testament in which God is specifically spoken of as a trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but there are a number of other verses which show that the early church did understand God as Trinity, centuries before the faith was defined in the historic creeds.

We can never fully comprehend the immeasurable greatness of God, to use a phrase from Paul's letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 1.19), much less can we put his greatness into words, but it is important to try, especially now, when we are being challenged by vulnerable young men and women who are being persuaded kill and maim people who do not share a particular understanding of God, jihadists who are taught from the Qurán that having false beliefs is worse than killing (Qurán 2.191).

The first time I visited a mosque to talk to its students about the Christian faith, a young boy challenged me, *Why do you worship three gods?* I didn't give a very good answer, because I had never thought that I did worship three gods. But the next time I was challenged, I had my answer ready. I followed the example of Jesus and answered the question with a question: *Why do you worship 99 gods?* The boy was horrified. He responded, *We have 99 beautiful names for God in our holy books, but we worship the one God.* And so, of course, do we.

In the first five centuries of the church, many Christians accused other Christians of heresy, because they did not share the same understanding of God. Bishops and priests were exiled, men and women were excommunicated, congregations were thrown into turmoil, as synod after synod, council after council, struggled to put the substance and essence of God into words. The debates became political, and sometimes they led to riots in which people were killed and wounded.

After centuries of dissension, the pre-Reformation church adopted the statement which we know as the Creed of Athanasius. Its 42 verses of elegant Latin were later put to music and for centuries they were said or sung every Sunday, or on high days and holy days, or at least on Trinity Sunday. There is an English translation on page 487 of the prayer book. Later, Peter will invite us to say these words in place of the Nicene creed. So you might like to turn to page 487 now.

As the heading at the top of the page says, the Athanasian creed is not a creed, it is a confession or summary of the Christian faith, as defined at a particular time in history. And it was not written by St Athanasius. In its final form, the Confession emerged from the church in southern France, two centuries after Athanasius, but it does reflect the theology for which he suffered so much.

Athanasius was a bishop of Alexandria in the 4th century. He had a tumultuous 45 years as bishop, defending the true faith against attacks from other bishops, and from successive emperors, and from pagan opponents of the church. He was sent into exile five times for insisting that the three persons of the Trinity were of the same substance, and equal in honour, at a time when other understandings of the nature of God were dominant in the church.

The so-called 'shield of the Trinity' in *Connections* appeared in France early in the 12th C, as an attempt to summarise the Athanasian confession. People struggled to understand it even then!

The confession has two sections, within a framework which asserts that right belief is essential for our salvation. This assertion puts many people off this confession, but all parties in the theological controversies which divided the early church agreed that believers needed to have a right understanding of God if they were to love him and to accept his amazing grace in creating and redeeming us. The so-called longer ending of the Gospel of Mark has a similar promise and a similar warning – *the one who believes and is baptised will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned.* (Mk16.6)

The two parts of the Confession try to sum up what the Scriptures teach about the two great controversies which divided the church in the early centuries – how can we put into human words the nature of divinity and the being of Jesus the Christ?

The first, longer, section runs from verse 3 to verse 27, on the next page. It asserts that Christians worship God as a Trinity in Unity, and tries to spell out precisely what that means, and to describe how the three Persons of God revealed in human experience and in the Scriptures are related to each other.

That relationship is summarised in the three verses at the foot of page 487 – verses 21, 22 and 23. The Father is neither created, nor begotten – there is no sense in the childish question, *Who*

made God? The Son is begotten, just as you and I were begotten, of two parents. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son – the Spirit is the Father and the Son at work in the world.

Last century some people began to worry about the words *Father* and *Son* – they seemed to suggest that the godhead was masculine, and that the relationship between the persons of the Godhead were somehow like the relations between human fathers and sons. As we know, some fathers and sons don't get on, and some fathers abuse their sons when they are young, and some sons abuse their fathers when they are old, as I have discovered in my nursing homes ministry.

So some Christian groups replaced the Biblical terms, Father, Son and Spirit, with impersonal terms like *Creator*, *Redeemer* and *Sanctifier* or *Ground of all Being*, *Eternal Word* and *Life-giving Presence*. But the Athanasian confession reminds us that the persons of the Trinity are real persons, and they have the one being – they are not three Lords, but one Lord, and the names the Scriptures give them are not job descriptions.

The second section of the confession begins at verse 30 on the next page, and runs to verse 41 – it asserts that our Lord Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, and, again, tries over and over to explain what that means. Jesus is both God and man: as God he was with the Father in heaven from the beginning; as man, Jesus was on earth for a short period, to redeem humankind, then he returned to his rightful place with the Father; as God, Jesus will come to earth again for the last judgment.

In this way, the Confession aimed to resolve the major question which divided Christians for centuries– if there is only one God, how do we understand the Father, the Creator, as God? and the Son as God? and the holy Spirit as God? Are there three gods? Is the one God divided into three parts? Was Jesus truly God, or was he a human infused with the power of God? Or was he actually the one God in the guise of a human, like some of the gods of Greece and Rome?

All creeds and confessions fail because they try to contain God, in human minds and human words. How can the imperfect describe the perfect? How can the created define the Creator, the redeemed the Redeemer, the taught and comforted with the teacher and comforter? They can't, because we humans can only know what God chooses to reveal to us.

There were many conflicting ideas being taught in the church of the 4th century and beyond, but that was nothing new -- in the very first century, Paul was writing to the first Christians condemning false teachers who were, he said, leading believers astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor. 11.3). The early church was plagued by Jewish legalism, and Gnosticism and Asceticism and Antominianism and a host of other isms; today our chief enemy is probably materialism, the false ism that tells us we don't need God to have a full and satisfying life.

So, what is there in this confession that we need to continue to take seriously, to take to heart, centuries after it was composed?

Firstly, of course, we need a true understanding of the being of God as trinity in unity. The first of the 39 Articles affirms our faith in the holy trinity, and the second affirms that Jesus is both fully God and fully Man. These understandings are where our faith begins. The more we love God, the more we want to know about him; and the more we know about him, the more we love him.

Secondly, the Confession affirms the importance of worship. Line 3: *we worship one God . . .* This confession is not just an academic exercise, it is not just a form of words agreed on to settle disputes. As human beings given life by God our prime business is worship. So we come here, Sunday by Sunday, not just to meet our friends, not just to be primed for mission, as Peter reminded us last Sunday, not just to take communion, but to give God the worship, the praise and the honour which is his due. Other people may take his name in vain, some seem to do it all the time, but we cannot do that, because we worship the Persons of the Godhead.

Thirdly, the confession affirms that our God is a trinity of persons in intimate relationships; they are relationships of equals, none is greater or less than another in nature, even though the roles of the Son and the Spirit may be subordinate to the role of the Father. This affirmation compels us to monitor our relationships with God and with each other.

Our relationship with God is not a relationship of equals, created beings are eternally subordinate to their Creator, but our relationships with each other need to be relationships of equals, even though some roles in society and in the church may be subordinate to others, and some people are more gifted in particular ways than others. We need, as the Scriptures tell us, to love others as we love ourselves, which means always to treat them as equals. And this includes our ministers.

When Martin Luther launched the Reformation 400 years ago this year, one of his core teachings was to affirm the New Testament teaching (1 Peter 2.3) that all believers are priests, they all have equal privileges and responsibilities – to live a holy life and to make disciples of all nations. Luther put it this way: *none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, pastor; but all of us are born solely priests. Then we take some from among these born priest and call and elect them to these offices that they may discharge the duties of the office in the name of all of us.* That is Peter's role, and Steve's role, among us, but we can't leave them to carry out the divine commission alone.

Thirdly, there is an urgency about having a right understanding of God. . . we may not like the way this Confession asserts this truth, but we do have only one life on earth, and, at the end of time, we will have to give an account of how we spent our years here. We know that *God is with us*, but we need to ask ourselves each day, *Are we with God? Lord, we believe; help our unbelief.*