

Trinity Sunday 2016

Last week, everyone was talking with great enthusiasm about the Eurovision Song contest. Did you prefer Russia or Ukraine? And why do we never seem to win these days – although we didn't get nul point once again!

Now, I want you to imagine a world where people talk with similar enthusiasm about the doctrine of the holy and undivided Trinity Seems rather unlikely doesn't it?

Gregory of Nazianzus lived in Constantinople in the 4th century – and it would appear that people could talk about nothing else. He wrote a letter to his brother saying:

'In this city if you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether the son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that the Father is greater, the Son is less. If you suggest that a bath is desirable, you will be told that there was nothing before the Son was created.'

It wasn't that they were mad, but the doctrine of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was a revolution in the understanding of the divine and they became very excited by it.

To say it was new, is perhaps not quite correct. When Christians looked back at the Old Testament they saw many hints and suggestions –

- The three angels who visit Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis.
- And the prophet Isaiah's vision of heaven in which the angels cry out three times, 'Holy! Holy! Holy!'

If the Old Testament was the revealing of God the Father, then we might describe the New Testament as the revealing of God the Son.

And Christ reveals the Holy spirit which he says 'will guide you into all truth'.

So we can describe ourselves as living in the age of the Spirit – or rather, or the whole Trinity – but it took some time for the Church to get there – as the doctrine of the Holy and Undivided Trinity is not immediately obvious.

One of the Creeds, the Athanasian Creed, has the line:

The Father incomprehensible

The Son incomprehensible

The Holy Spirit incomprehensible

And we are tempted to add: 'The whole bloomin' thing incomprehensible!

What Christians believe about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is wonderfully simple – but to say what is simple is not easy.

We try, in our limited and human language, to express something of the wonder and the majesty and the mystery of that reality at the centre of the Christian understanding of the divine. That God goes beyond all conceptual understanding, even our most basic concepts break down when we are talking about God. No wonder then that Christ says that he has many things to tell his followers, but they can't bear them at this time. It's not a cop out but a recognition that there are some ideas that are just too radical for them to cope with at the moment – but it will come in time.

Within a few hundred years, everyone was talking about the Trinity. There was intense debate and discussion, as it became necessary to explain and express Christian faith, so it could be better communicated.

But there was something else – the Church seldom knows what it believes until someone comes along with a different view – and people realise that something isn't quite right. – and these ideas were called heresies. Some heretical ideal actually sound quite good – until you start thinking through their implications – so you can see why they came about and why they are attractive to begin with.

There was, for example, someone called Arius who struggled with the idea that God could be incarnate in Jesus Christ. How could that happen? So he taught that Christ wasn't God but actually some sort of created demi-God – and this point of view became enormously popular until someone called Athanasius pointed out that if Jesus wasn't also God, then he hadn't taken on our human nature, and then human beings weren't saved at all.

In that sense, those whom the Church has called heretics should actually be thanked! Because it was through those controversies that Christians were forced – indeed, are still forced – to think through what they believe, and clarify it.

All of this might sound bizarre and obscure, and wonder why anyone would care about such fine points of theology. These days, the idea of people calling each other heretics, pronouncing anathemas and excommunicating each other seems embarrassing and wrong to us. And it's true that arguments don't help make Christianity appealing.

But I also want to say that what we believe is not a matter of indifference, and that some arguments really are worth arguing, and some fights, really worth fighting – because accepting the alternative would lead to something quite awful.

When Saint Paul says in Romans that we ‘justified by faith’, one of the things he is saying is that it is our faith that matters.

From its earliest beginnings Christianity was a religion defined by what it believed. The Christian faith is a religion of ‘orthodoxy’ (that is, ‘right belief’), rather than ‘orthopraxy’ (right action). It’s not what you did that brought you into relationship with God, but what you believed. This was truly radical, in fact, it still is radical and distinctive about Christianity. It didn’t matter about your race, gender, class, status, or anything else – you could still be a Christian if you believed. Nothing could bar you from full membership of the Church – Christ’s salvation was offered to Jew and Gentile, slave or free person, men and women. Christianity is open to everyone who believes.

It’s tempting to think that we live in a very different world today – and indeed we do. But there is one sense in which our world is exactly the same – what we believe matters.

It matters, not because we think we are right and everyone else is wrong, but because what we believe has consequences – social, moral, ethical and financial, as well as spiritual.

Indeed, we might argue that the question is even more pressing in our liberal, post-modern society that rejects the concept of objective truth and grand narratives and instead is expressly multi-cultural, multi-faith and therefore has multiple truths. But what happens when these plural ‘truths’ are in some way mutually exclusive?

What are the limits of toleration?

What beliefs and opinions are unacceptable?

What boundaries are there on freedom of expression?

These are all questions that our society, indeed our world, is wrestling with at the moment. We are very uncertain about the limits of freedom, belief and cultural practice;

Can a Muslim woman choose to wear a veil over her face at work?

Can a bakery refuse to bake a cake for the wedding of a gay couple?

Can a golf-club refuse to admit women as members?

We have taken the line that what we believe doesn’t really matter – except that it does, as we keep discovering – as these beliefs have consequences.

In this context, what Christian faith has to offer is the assertion that what we believe matters, and that we should deeply explore the beliefs that prompt our actions. Too often, it is only the outcomes we focus on, rather than their source and origin.

Finally, going back to the Trinity, it is this simple and beautiful mystery that forever makes us explore what it is we actually believe.

To say something is a mystery is not to say that we can't talk about it.

To say something is a mystery is to say that there is no end of the talking of it

Our language will never exhaust all there is to say,

And to say that God is beyond all understanding is not to say that he is unintelligible, but that our minds will never comprehend all there is to know.

When in the Mass we join in singing with the angels and archangels – Holy! Holy! Holy! We are proclaiming that we believe in a God who has been revealed to us, whose glory we share in, but will always be more wonderful than we can possibly imagine – and the only possible response is worship:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.