

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY SUNDAY YEAR B 27 MAY 2018

Does the doctrine of the Holy Trinity matter? Or is it a bit like Einstein's General Theory of Relativity? We're told that it's true, but it interests only a few people, and we can get along perfectly well without knowing anything about it.

The doctrine states that the one God is revealed as three persons. This statement raises questions. How is being 'one' squared up with being 'three'? And what is meant by 'persons'? We have a reasonable idea of human persons. What can be carried over when you are dealing with divine persons? The doctrine needs further explanation.

The explanation accepted by the Church was formulated in the fourth century. It introduced the term 'nature'. That's not nature in the sense of fields, woods, birds and insects. It's nature in the sense of what someone is: she's generous by nature, he has a friendly nature, for example. The doctrine of the Trinity states that there is one divine nature which each of the three persons possesses fully and equally. It's not shared out between them, each getting one third. If we think of the second person of the Trinity, for example, by nature he is God, by person he is the Son. Corresponding statements can be made about the Father and the Holy Spirit. (An aside for completeness' sake: when the Son came into this world he took human nature as well; he was and is one person with two natures.)

The Church also teaches that we cannot experience God's nature except through the Father or the Son or the Spirit. It's misleading to think, for example, that the Trinity is like three bottles containing the same wine: the wine could exist without being in the bottles.

Sometimes other words with the same meaning as 'nature' are used. 'Substance' is one of them: some of us may remember the BCP version of the creed – 'of one substance with the Father'. Our current version uses the word 'being' – of one being with the Father.

By now your brain's probably hurting – almost as much as mine when writing this sermon – it's all words and theories. What about something more down to earth? It is a fact that most races and cultures have believed in a God or gods. We are in the Jewish-Christian tradition, and in the Old Testament – the scriptures we share with the Jewish people – you can see the awareness developing that the God of the Jews is actually the God for all peoples, the God of the whole earth, rather than just Israel's God. The concepts of the word of God and the Spirit of God occur in the Old

Testament, describing how God is involved in the world. There was a reluctance to say it was the holy God himself who had contact with the world: word and Spirit were, in a sense, his ambassadors or, to use a fashionable word, avatars. The prophet Isaiah exclaimed, “Woe is me!” when he had a vision of God. The phrase ‘sons of God’ also appears in the Old Testament: sometimes it refers to the angels, the heavenly court, though it is also used of all Israelites. They are sons of God. Sometimes the king of Israel is called God’s son, signifying his special rôle as ruler on earth of God’s people.

So the terms word, son, spirit (and others, in fact), associated with God, were familiar to the Jewish people. Then Jesus is born, lives, dies and is raised from the dead. After that, a ‘power from on high’ comes upon his followers, as we celebrated at Pentecost last week. Gradually Jesus’ followers, the Church, realise that they have experienced God’s presence in three ways – as Father, Son and Spirit – and the experience continues. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity develops, as Christians reflect upon what has happened and ask, ‘How can these things be? How should we talk about God?’ You won’t find the eventual doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament, but it tries to make sense of what is there and is true in the ongoing life of the Church.

The doctrine of the Trinity matters for the ongoing life of the Church because it shows us what we should be like: a diverse community, united in love. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are different persons, yet they work as one for the salvation of the world. ‘God so loved the world...’. We are different from each other, yet we share a deep unity, our life in God. The calling of the Church is to reflect the life of the Trinity in mutual love and working for the salvation of the world. The destiny of each Christian is to be drawn into the life of the Trinity – and S. Paul indicates this when he writes about the Spirit bearing witness that we are God’s children when we pray to the Father. Everything we do should be a growing into this life, and an invitation to others to share in this life. What we believe about God should affect the way we live. The doctrine of the Trinity does matter: God is our beginning, and God is our end.