

Sermon preached by The Very Revd C.A. Lewis, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford
on Sunday 19 June 2011

St Patrick's, Dublin; Trinity Sunday; Mt 28;16-20; 19.6.11

Trinity Sunday. Apparently, people (not me) make great efforts to avoid preaching on Trinity Sunday. They tell the story of Augustine of Hippo, walking on the beach and finding a boy who was digging a hole in the sand. Augustine asked ... 'why the hole?' ... and the boy said that he was going to put the sea into it. Augustine laughed. The boy asked St Augustine what HE was doing at the time, to which he replied that he was writing a book on the Trinity. The boy's turn to laugh... infinite tasks. Or – when I was explaining Christ Church, Oxford to a visitor and saying that here there is one institution called Christ Church, which contains within it a college, a cathedral and a school, the third person in the group said: 'When you understand that, you are half way to the mystery of the Trinity'.

How do we start? For once, today of all days, we can start not with ourselves but with God. Strange to say, God made us; contrary to the view of the critics, we do not make him. So

today we stop treating everything we do (including our religion) as some kind of therapy for our benefit. This worship today or on any day is not for us; it is for God. Today of all days we praise God and are taken out of ourselves. Attend to God – not to the church or to the clergy or finance or politics, although God relates to all of these. Come back David Jenkins, sometime bishop of Durham, all is forgiven! He got us talking of God. So I suppose does Richard Dawkins; I only wish he did it better.

Who is this God? The Trinity helps us, not just as a great theological exploration, but also in our experience of God. Put another way...how do you explore God and then not just stop with the first experience, trying to regain it... like people's nostalgia for their youth?

I wonder where you start. I could say 'Hands up those for God the Father'. Some of us start with a sense of God as creator of the world in all its wonder. God, glorious and great; mysterious and very deep; beyond and above us, within and beside us. St Augustine (the same one) wrote of God in his 'Confessions': 'You, my God, are supreme... You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present amongst us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever

enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you. You are unchangeable and yet you change all things. You are never new, never old, and yet all things have new life from you."

For Augustine, God to be worshipped and adored. Approach him kneeling, which is hard to do, but wonderful when you do it. The longing for God the Father is deep within us; indeed it is probably there, waiting to be discovered in all of us.

Yet we need the other persons of the Trinity. Why? Because this creator God may seem remote or his presence has been overlaid and concealed by all kinds of unhelpful experiences (perhaps indeed by experience of fathers) - and we do not have enough in a creator God to give us salvation and lead us into new life.

In St John's Gospel, Philip says to Jesus 'Lord, show us the Father' and Jesus says 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' (John 14:8) In other words, God is more than a creator; he is as he is in Jesus. God loves and cares as Jesus did; he also goads and challenges. He is not a mere 'spiritual' God, but the one who overturns the tables in the temple. And God is the kind of God who suffers with and for us – able to bear our sins - opening wide his arms for us on the cross.

Some of us are Father people; others are Jesus people. The immensely attractive person of Jesus; that is where many start: 'what a friend we have in Jesus'. Yet the temptation with Jesus is to walk with him as friend and brother, excluding the great sweep and majesty of the Creator of all things, excluding too all those people who are not (or have not had the chance to be) Jesus people.

The Trinity is an exploration in theology and also in life: in trying to give the best shape to Christian belief – accumulated experience of God. And that is especially seen in what might be described as the last person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Through some of Christian history, the Church has been Binitarian not Trinitarian: a Father and a Son and maybe a little of the Virgin Mary and/or wisdom too, but not much of the Holy Spirit. So there is little doubt in my mind that it is the contemporary emphasis, in our culture, on experience that has helped Christianity to discover more of the Spirit as a true part of the Trinity.

If you took a world survey, the Holy Spirit is where many do start: world Christianity is a strange and wonderful thing, blossoming in all kinds of unexpected directions, some of them pretty wild and not very C. of I. or C. of E. Yet we can learn of God: God present and active in our lives

now, so that Christian life is fresh, immediate to our experience. God giving new life and hope and leading us into the truth, experienced together and individually.

I heard two stories - both of the birth of Down's Syndrome babies to families. One was to a family which was initially deeply shocked, but then gradually - through the love and prayers of people round them - came to see their new child positively, as a lovely child and as someone who had much to bring to the life of everyone around him...an example of the way in which the Holy Spirit brought new understanding and hope in a place which could have been full of despair. What started as a sad story, ended as an inspiring one, because of the power of the Spirit in people's lives.

And the contrasting story is also of a Down's Syndrome baby, where the birth was seen by parents and others as a curse, and where nobody allowed the Holy Spirit's power to break through in new understanding and new life.

God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit: not seen mechanically or as some kind of diagram. No – seen from the way we come to know God more deeply, prompted and given shape by the Christian tradition. And so to a question: which person of the Trinity do I know not best but least

well? Perhaps I am most attracted to the Father (a Father person), loving God on mountain tops, on my knees, in my greenhouse. That is a part, but then I need to go further to discover whole new worlds in God - in the person of Jesus and in life in the Spirit.

Then I may be the one drawn to God the Son. Following him in practice, determined to do good in the world, to support his church, to bear the burdens of others. God as he is in Jesus - his life, teaching, his death and resurrection. But then again my knowledge of God needs expanding – so that I attend to the wonder of God, and also to his present activity in the Spirit: God as he is known and felt now - God active; his people alive with enthusiasm at knowing him. New life for all in the Spirit.

So the question is worth repeating, this time in a more positive form: Looking at my life, which person of the Trinity do I need to know better?

Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox priest in both senses of orthodox, went into a restaurant and the waitress, wanting to show him to a table, asked him 'Are you one person?' I guess that he answered that he was! When it comes to God, Christians through the ages have had this deep God-given sense of the nature of God: three and also one, one and also three. The Trinity is a gift

to lead us deeper into the life of God and his world. For myself, my answer to my question is that I need to know the Spirit more deeply. I hope each of you today will answer the same question for yourselves.