

Trinity Sunday

St Mary's, Barnes, May 27th, 2018

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have much in common, especially of course the belief that there is one God. Holy and eternal, creator of heaven and earth, sovereign Lord of All. The first reading we had this morning, Isaiah's vision of the awesome holiness and majesty of God, would have been affirmed not just by Jews but Muslims as well. Without for one moment losing sight of that truth Christianity has always insisted that this one God exists in three forms or modes of being. On this Trinity Sunday this is what we celebrate. So, let's explore this profound mystery by considering two questions. First, how did this belief arise? What is its basis? And secondly, what is its meaning and relevance for us today?

If you go into the National Gallery you will see Fra Angelico's luminous painting of the Baptism of Christ. Jesus is being baptised by John at the River Jordan and as the scripture says, he heard the words "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." At the same time, the Holy Spirit, symbolised as a dove, rests upon him. The whole of the rest of the Gospel story is a working out of this Trinitarian relationship. Jesus lived his life in intimate union with the one he addressed as Abba, Father. This was at the heart of his ministry, culminating in that agonised prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father take this cup of suffering from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done". That life was one of beloved sonship lived out in perfect filial response. After the baptism we read that immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness for the great temptation or testing. It was through the guidance and in the strength of that spirit that his whole life was lived. So, to sum up, Jesus lived his life in prayerful union with the one he addressed as Father he lived in as a beloved Son, and he lived it in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the course of time the first Christians realised that the resurrection of Christ was a resounding affirmation of that Triune relationship; that it had not been destroyed by death: rather, it was revealed to be an eternal reality. On the cross Jesus had cried out “My god, my God why hast thou forsaken me” but the resurrection discloses that at the deepest level he remained one with his Eternal Father, indeed as John’s Gospel brings out, that moment of utter darkness was in fact the moment of supreme glory, for it showed the perfect the obedience of the Son to the Father even through the hell of human alienation. As the sin of humanity broke upon him he and the father remained one. His was an unbroken union. In him Heaven and earth, God and humanity were joined never to be unjoined. They saw that this was a relationship that existed before all worlds, in the eternal self-giving of the father to the son, and the son’s perfect response to the father, in a love that circled between them. Death had not destroyed. It had disclosed this relationship to be an eternal reality worked out in human terms in Jesus.

People sometimes remark “You couldn’t have made it up.” Nor could we have made this truth up. Nor could we have arrived at it by process of reasoning from the world as we know it. But as we only know anyone in so far as they are willing to reveal something of themselves to us, so it is with God. He has chosen to make enough of himself known to us for us to be able to live by.

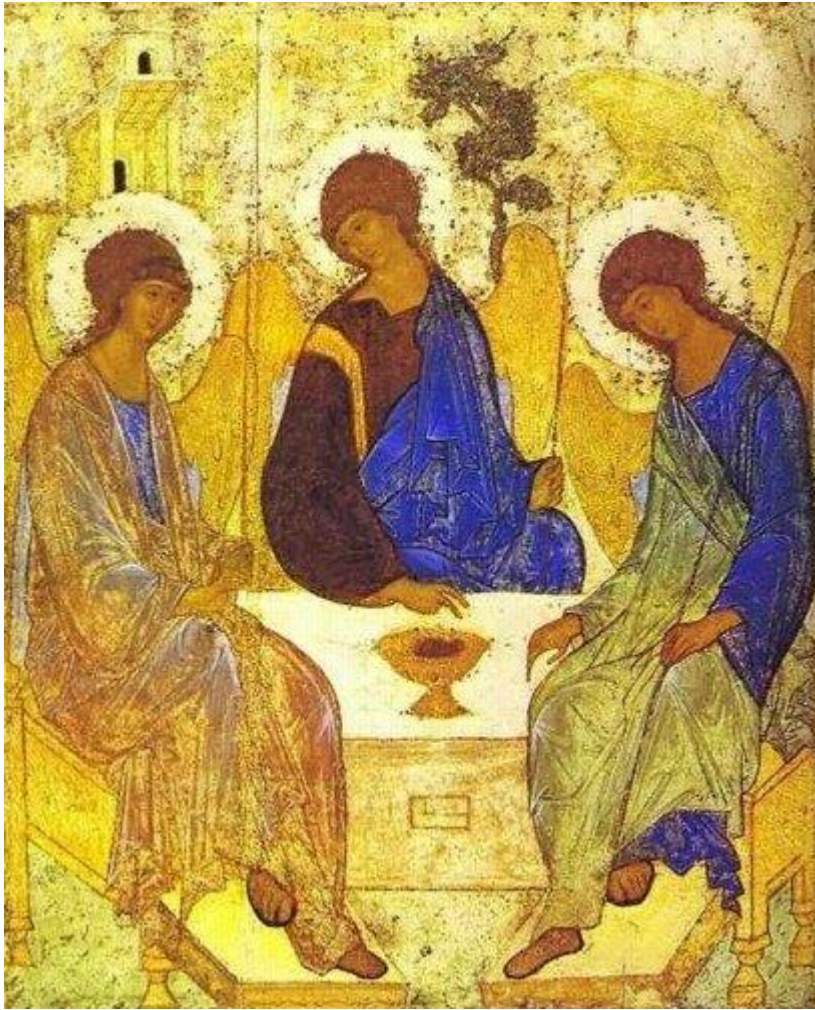
And so, to the second question, the meaning and relevance of this for us today. When the Risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden, he said to her “Go and tell my brethren, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God”. He calls his friends, Brethren. If he is uniquely the Son of God, but they too now share that sonship. He says that his father is their father, his God their God.

They have been taken into the same relationship with God that he eternally enjoys.

The first letter of John begins by saying that he bears witness to what he has seen and heard, namely the life of God in Christ, and he goes on to say that this is “that you may have communion with us, for our communion is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ”. The same word, Communion, Koinonia in Greek, is used both for joining in the Christian community and sharing in the life of the Father and the Son. It is a remarkable claim: that in this church his morning we are not just in a koinonia with one another but through this we are taken into the very life of the Godhead

Judaism and Islam rightly emphasise the utter transcendence or otherness of God-and so does Christianity. But our claim is that this utterly transcendent God, in the person of his eternal son, has taken human nature, has shared our human life to the full, and taken that humanity into God. Our human voices are heard in the very heart of God.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle to be solved. It is not an optional extra to the faith: it is our very life blood as Christians. Our Christian life begins by being baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This service begins with the same words and ends with them in the blessing. Our prayers often open with the words “In the power of the spirit, and in union with Christ Jesus, let us pray to the father.” That is our life, the very life of God, and as Bishop Michael Curry said so eloquently at the royal wedding, this life is nothing less than divine love, the utter self-giving, which created the world in the first place; which guides and empowers us through it; which urges us to change the world for the better, and which takes us through life and death into the burning heart of love at the centre of all things. To be a Christian is to be taken up into the unceasing flow of this love.



The Trinity by Andrei Rublev, (1410 ?)

For me this life-giving truth is wonderfully symbolised in Rublev's wonderful Icon. Based on the story in Genesis when Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality to three strangers who turned out to be angels, it was taken by the early church as a pointer to God as Holy Trinity. Earlier depictions, like the mosaic at St Vitale in Ravenna, show Abraham and Sarah. Rublev focuses on the three angels alone

Painted in early 15th century Novgorod in Russia, the elegant lines of the robes of the angels draws on the Greek classical style going back 2000 years before. The circle made by the tilting of the angel's heads towards each other speaks of a loving beauty circling between them. As we gaze, we too, the viewer, is also invited in to sit at the table.

The beauty of this love draws us in; as does this morning's eucharist - invites us to sit at table in the heavenly banquet, sharing the life of love in the Godhead. In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ Jesus we are taken into that life of eternal love; And in this Eucharist our communion with that self-giving life is renewed and refreshed.

I said earlier we could not have made our understanding of God up, not could we have arrived at it by a process of independent reasoning. We know it only because God has chosen to reveal enough of himself for us to live by. "Taste and see that the Lord is good" said the psalmist, and that is what millions of Christians have discovered over the centuries. They have lived by it. The proof, as they say, is in the eating. And that is where they have found the proof. In the living of it.

So, it is that as we go out from this church, minute by minute, in good times and bad, we are caught up into that unceasing flow of love circling from God to humanity and humanity to God. To be a Christian is to live in and enjoy that flow, letting it shape our life and enabling it to be a blessing to others.