

“WE BELIEVE.....”

Do you know, on Thursday night I had a bad dream about this service. Everything was going wrong. I arrived in the vestry fifteen minutes late, to find a group of people, none of whom I recognised, glaring angrily at me. Then I found myself on the chancel steps, trying to begin the service but without the words for the Opening Responses or any of the material I needed at all. Then I heard a commotion in the front porch and discovered that the Pre-School children and leaders were all out there, together with a model of Noah’s Ark which was the size of a carnival float and which they wished to present to us during the service. As my sense of panic reached its height, I woke up in a state of terror, only to realise, with indescribable relief that this was only Friday morning and that Trinity Sunday 2007 had not actually happened yet.

Most ministers will tell you that they have these nightmares from time to time about services which go all wrong. I suppose it is natural when leading worship is such an important part of our work. Trinity Sunday, I suspect though, always has caused more bad dreams than most Sundays because it has always seemed to demand of preachers that they stand here and try to explain something which is inexplicable. How do you explain the nature of God to be three separate persons and yet one whole person? It is a theological, mathematical and logistical nightmare. I remember one minister telling me that he always made a point of taking his holiday on Trinity Sunday so that some other poor soul would have to deal with it. There has also been a tendency in recent years for Trinity Sunday to slip quietly out of the URC Lectionary and Prayer Handbook or at least to be downgraded to “The first Sunday after Pentecost. (Trinity-in brackets and in very small print)”

I suspect though that the reason Trinity Sunday is ignored in many places is not just because ministers can’t face the hassle of explaining the inexplicable but also because most of us are thinking, deep down, “who cares?” How many people in our congregations are honestly likely to be losing sleep over the doctrine of the Trinity? As I remember saying at our Fellowship lunch last November, most people- in- the-pews are not particularly turned on by academic theology, by doctrines and heresies and scholarly arguments from the Desert Fathers and Thomas Aquinas. What they want is an understanding of God which helps them to cope with life.

We want to know where God is when someone we love is under sentence of death; where God is when people are swept away in tidal waves and earthquakes; where God is when our job is under threat and we have a mortgage to pay and a family to support; where God is when we have made a monumental mess of life and hurt more people than we can bear to imagine.

We want to know how to forgive when anger and bitterness are tearing us apart, how to be brave when we are in dark and terrifying places, how to keep positive when we are worn down by endless disappointments, how to get our priorities right when we are frantically trying to juggle work, family, community, church, how to get our lives back on track when everything seems to be taking a wrong turning and leading us into dead ends.

We want to know how we overcome the barriers between ourselves and other Christian churches; what we should say to the Muslims and Hindus and Jews we meet; what goes so terribly wrong with religion-any religion- that it can get to a place where it justifies war and terrorism in the name of its god. We want to know what to

say to our families and friends who tell us that we are crazy to believe in God at all in this day and age. We need a “working faith” not a theoretical one.

You may have noticed though that neither of the Bible readings we heard even attempted to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. You may or may not know that there is actually no passage in the whole of the Bible which explains the doctrine of the Trinity. We are simply introduced to God as Father, as Jesus Christ the Son and as the Holy Spirit. And both of our readings today suggest that this is good news: that believing in God as Father, Son and Spirit makes life better for us: it makes us happy, brave, strong in the face of trouble, confident, assured, loving and keeps us on the right paths. The Trinity is a “working faith,” not a purely academic argument.  
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Alright then-let’s think about it- how does it make life better to see God in these three ways and yet as one perfect unity? I offer you three little stories.

First: I used to visit an Infant School in Banstead where the Headmistress was known to be very strict. In morning assemblies she would be the only member of staff present in the hall. Yet the children would come into that hall in silence-music would be playing for them to listen to; when they had all sat down she would speak very quietly, never raising her voice and I would then lead the assembly. When I had finished she would give out any Notices, again without raising her voice. If necessary she would make it quite clear what was acceptable behaviour and what was not. Then the music would be played again and the children would walk quietly out.

I know that some of the parents and some of the staff thought her too strict but I could see that those little children really loved her. They would smile and wave to her as they went out. They would stop her in the corridors to tell her an important piece of news. They were very young, they were adjusting to living and working in a big school community for the first time and she made them feel secure. She set clear boundaries and was seen to be strong enough to maintain them. For her to have swept away restraints, to have been seen as a weak character would have scared those children. At that stage in their lives they needed to feel the security of a strength which was greater than their own.

And this, I feel, is why we need to believe in God as Father, as a creative power, as a deep wisdom, as a source of strength which is greater than our own. If you take God away, then we, the human race, are the highest power in the universe and that is frightening. Because we get things wrong and our strength is limited. Without a greater power to call on, how can we cope when we are faced with serious illness; tragic bereavement, exhausting stress levels, difficult decisions, broken lives? Without a higher power to answer to, what is to stop men and women from destroying themselves and others through a total lack of restraint? Organised religion may have caused problems in the past but today, in our “religion-free” society, I see a lot of very frightened men, women and children. They push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour further and further out and the fear in our society is only a faint reflection of the fear in people’s heads, as greed, hatred, violence, abuse and self-destruction take over their lives.

Belief in God as Father gives us the reassurance of a higher power to call on when we know that we cannot cope alone; it gives us guidelines by which to live our lives; it



who fulfils them? The power of God, as it was seen in Christ, is given to each member of the human race as they believe and as they trust. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires and enables us to be great people, even in a comparatively small life; who enables us do great things, even in the most confined circumstances; who shows us how to rebuild broken lives, how to cheer up desolate lives, how to make heroic lives that have been utterly selfish. It is the Holy Spirit who moves us, ordinary people, to make a difference in the world for the sake of God and in the name of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit stops religion from becoming static. It transforms our celebration of Holy Communion from a mere “memorial” of something long past into a living means of bringing God’s grace into our lives.

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I find it difficult then to imagine a faith in which God is not known and experienced in these three different, yet converging ways. Without God as Father and Creator, Jesus would be no more than another great, good man and the Holy Spirit no more than some kind of power in our genetic make-up which some privileged people would have more than others.

Without God as Jesus Christ, we would find it hard to love God or to think that he loved us.

Without God as the Holy Spirit, we would find it hard to believe in God at all or to believe in ourselves.

So Trinity Sunday is still well worth celebrating because God, as Trinity can transform our lives. There is no doubt that the doctrine of the Trinity it raises a lot of questions which are impossible to answer. But as a summing up of all that we have come to know and to experience of God, it makes a good start and it makes a good finish.

Amen.