

Does the Trinity add up?

A sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity by Nathan Nettleton, 27 May 2018
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Message

The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to see that, though exalted and transcendent, God is nevertheless close and personally involved with us.

Sermon

One of the main reasons I mostly stick to the church calendar and the set cycle of Bible readings is that it stops me from ignoring difficult topics and just preaching my hobby horses. But as the English preacher Colin Morris said, any preacher with any sense calls in sick on Trinity Sunday.

The challenge of Trinity Sunday is of course that it asks me to preach about the doctrine of the Trinity. This is the teaching that God is three, traditionally expressed as Father, Son and Spirit, but is still just one God. Now apart from the fact that it is very difficult to work the maths out, it is a difficult topic to preach about because the contours of the argument are extremely subtle. The greatest intellects in the world have had trouble with this one, so there is not much chance of me adequately explaining it, let alone making the explanation inspiring.

I'm also wary of the doctrine of the Trinity because it has been abused. In the history of the church, it has often been used as a tool of oppression to divide up the orthodox and the heretics, and people who have been unable to get their heads around it have been kicked out of the church or even executed.

I think it is an important teaching, but its importance is not in whether you understand it or not, or even in whether you believe it or not. Its importance is in what sort of God it is trying to describe. The issue that was at stake when the doctrine was nipped out was not the maths; it was an issue of how God relates to us, and that is important. So that's what we will seek to explore this evening.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Bible. There are things in the Bible that give us reasons to think that perhaps God might be understood as a trinity, but there is nothing that attempts to explain it or that says it matters whether you or anybody else believes it.

But I said earlier, there was an important reason why the idea was developed and why it came to be seen as important. In essence what happened was that there were some people who we'll introduce shortly who were saying "God is like this and you must view God like this," and there was another group of people saying "Well yes, but God is also like this, and we mustn't lose that." And the first group were saying "No, you can't have it both ways, our view is right and yours is wrong."

Now until I put some description into that little argument, it isn't going to mean much, so let's have a go. Let me illustrate it by quoting from some hymns, since most of us get a lot of our images of God from what we sing. Have a listen to these:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,

in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days,
almighty victorious, thy great name we praise.

Or this:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending
comes full homage to demand.

Or from the same hymn, a verse that is based on the reading we heard tonight from the prophet Isaiah:

At his feet the six-winged seraphs,
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Lord most high!

And then there is another hymn we sing from time to time, also based on the same vision from Isaiah:

Holy, holy, holy!
though the darkness hide thee,
though the sinful human eye thy glory may not see,
You alone are holy,
there is none beside thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

These examples all paint a rather awe-inspiring and even terrifying picture of God. They picture God as high up and far off and dominant over everything. If you were to encounter such a God face to face, you would feel like you had walked into the heart of a nuclear reactor and like Isaiah, you would fall down and scream and think you were about to die.

But let's hear some contrasting hymns:

Love divine, all loves excelling
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us your humble dwelling,
all you faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, you are all compassion,
boundless love that makes us whole;
visit us with your salvation,
enter every trembling soul.

When God almighty came to earth
He took the pain of Jesus birth,

He took the flight of refugee,
And whispered, "Humbly follow me."

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, your glory veiled;
not to be served but to serve,
and give your life that we might live.

These are quite different images of God, aren't they? If you stumbled into the presence of God, and God seemed like this, then you would be likely to feel comforted and safe and befriended and cared for.

These two quite different images of God have quite different implications for us and not only for how we see God, but how we see ourselves. If you hold one of these views to the exclusion of the other, it dictates much of your view of what it means to be human, of who you are and of what God feels about you.

OK, let's revisit the fourth century and check out what this might have to do with the argument that led to the nailing down of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The principle characters were a couple of blokes called Athanasius and Arius. Now on the surface the debate was actually about whether or not Jesus was divine, that is whether or not Jesus was God, but as I have suggested the underlying question was what is God like.

The Church was teaching that when we look at Jesus, we are looking at God; that Jesus is the complete self-revelation of the God of the universe; that Jesus is in fact God in human form; and that therefore if you want to know what God is like, you start by looking at what Jesus was like. The old Nicene creed expressed it saying that Jesus was "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of one being with the Father."

Now Arius couldn't come at this. He rejected the idea that Jesus was God, and argued that Jesus should be understood as an exemplary human being. Arius had a point and a lot of what he argued about the humanity of Jesus was good theology and has been reclaimed by theologians since, but the problem with Arius was that he saw God in a very one dimensional way.

Arius would have liked those first hymns, and hated the second lot. For Arius God was so far above us humans that the idea of God taking on human expression was an outrage. God, by definition, said Arius, is self-contained, complete within himself, and not needing to communicate himself in any way. God is exalted, holy, pure, absolute, glorious, and for Arius the idea of such a God lowering himself to become personally involved with his creatures was demeaning and blasphemous. He reckoned it was a pagan vulgarisation of God; it made God like one of the gods of the Greek pantheon, a sort of superhero who ate and drank and fought and occasionally dropped in to sexually assault a human being.

Humanness and divinity are too far removed from one another for a connection, said Arius. God is the great God on high, wholly other, untouched by our petty concerns. What use would there be in a God who *needed* us in any way. And in all the history of the church there has probably never been a more exalted glorious image of God than that portrayed by Arius.

But enter the team for the defence, championed by Athanasius. Athanasius took issue with Arius' position at its central point. Being self-contained, superior and distant is not the essential feature of divinity he said. We humans, perhaps even more now than ever before tend to worship independence before we'll worship God, and we easily imagine that God relates to the world with the same fierce independence that we often relate to the world. We consider it the worst fate in the world to be relegated to dependency on someone else.

As youngsters we could hardly wait to be old enough to be independent of the oldies. As oldies we save for our retirement so that we won't have to be dependent on our kids. People are often afraid of marriage because they fear having someone really need them, someone who can't keep their distance, but I even worse is the fear that I might come to depend on them. Distance is so safe and comfortable.

People who work in human services talk a lot about professional distance. Don't get too close to your clients or you'll lose your objectivity. If you start caring too much your judgment will be affected. That's all very well, but Athanasius argued that we make a serious mistake if we impute the same style to God.

Athanasius argued that the essential defining feature of God was not utter independence, but self-giving; love that gives and gives and gives. And he argued that this self-giving occurs even within God – that between the Father and the Son and the Spirit there is total mutual self-giving. And then this self-giving looks outwards and expresses itself in a totally unprofessional nearness to others, including us.

God gets totally involved with us, loving, cherishing, nurturing, longing, craving our response and our giving in return. God is the Spirit who moves through us with every breath, who whispers into our ear, who prompts us and cajoles us towards god-likeness, expressed in self-giving and love.

Athanasius accused Arius of having a sterile God who doesn't generate, doesn't shine, doesn't communicate, doesn't reveal. A God who sits in isolated splendour, useless and irrelevant and passionless. The God made known in Jesus is dynamic, involved, always busy relating, cherishing, shining, revealing, expressing, giving. A God who can know joy and pain, a God who longs for us to return the love we are shown, a God who hurts when we fail to respond and who grieves when we damage ourselves in the process.

Needless to say, officially Athanasius won the debate, and the doctrine of the Trinity was spelled out and became official teaching. But it is amazing how many Arians you still meet, and how Arian our churches have often been. There are no shortage of church people around who would claim to believe in the Trinity but who teach a thoroughly Arian image of God, high exalted, distant, uninvolved.

That's why I reckon it's worth talking about the Trinity, even if it makes preachers like me cringe. Arian images of God make me cringe even more. God is a passionate Spirit. God has created us in order that we and God might relate to one another. God needs you and me and will be unfulfilled until we respond to God's love and begin to give in return as passionately as God gives to us.

That's also why church is so important. We need to practice inter-dependence. If God was utterly self-contained and professionally distant, then we could respond in an uninvolved and individual manner. But the God who is characterised by love and self-giving needs us to learn to love and give and be in community with one another. It is in community that we can discover God in the passions and conflicts and joys and giving of community life.

It is however true that just turning up to worship each Sunday is something that people can do while continuing to be "professionally distant". We can cloth it in niceness and feelings of warmth and togetherness, but not allow much depth to develop. Whereas a lot of the yearnings that were finding voice in our recent Open Space conversations were for the development of greater depths of involvement and mutual commitment in our shared life. How we will go about that is an ongoing conversation, but it is a conversation that is not remote from our fundamental beliefs about God, for what we are ultimately longing to do is immerse ourselves into the life of self-giving loving inter-dependence that is the life of our triune God.