

Today is Trinity Sunday, and I think it would be fair to say that of all the understandings that our forebears have passed down to us, the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most quirky and one of the most difficult. Difficult that is, if you're trying to explain it. And explaining it is what preachers seem to have traditionally felt obliged to try and do on Trinity Sunday. You might as well ask someone to explain the evolution of the tin opener and make it sexy.

Maybe the Trinity — the understanding that our one God is in fact a union of three persons [or persona] usually designated as Father, Son and Holy Spirit — maybe the Trinity is not so much something you need to get your head around as something you experience in your relationship with God.

And maybe if you really experience it then the explanation will seem rather unnecessary, a bit like trying to explain why you fell in love.

And on the other hand, if you don't experience it, then explanations will probably be nothing but hot air.

I suppose one of the questions that a non believer may ask a believer is how do you experience God

How do we respond? - My experience may be quite different from yours- Just as its hard to explain to someone who has not fallen in love what falling in love is like.

One of the reasons that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged is because human experience of God is so diverse. It is not that the Trinity is not inspirational. It is the attempts to explain the Trinity that almost inevitably fall well short of being inspirational. Not only do they fall well short of being inspirational, they usually fall well short of succeeding as explanations too.

I'll give you a tip. When the church has traditionally described something as a mystery, don't expend too much energy trying to exhaustively explain it. They probably called it a mystery because nobody else had ever managed to explain it either.

The good news is that this doesn't matter. Christian faith is NOT about explanations, it is about experience. It is about a relationship with the living God. Have you ever attempted to come up with an exhaustive explanation of the experience of falling in love? You can say things about it that are true, but you can never explain it in such a way that a person who hadn't experienced it would understand what you were talking about. In the end it is still a mystery. In fact to push that analogy a bit further, imagine trying to write down a set of instructions for falling in love. An explanation for someone who didn't previously know the experience, so that if they followed your description they would actually fall in love. Could you do it? It's a ridiculous idea isn't it? And yet the fact that you can't explain the experience or write a manual for it doesn't stop you from falling in love.

The experience comes whether you can comprehend it or not. It can come even if you don't believe in it. Now exactly the same is true of the Trinity.

You see before there was ever a doctrine of the Trinity, there was an experience of the Trinity. The early church experienced God in certain ways, and as they attempted to describe their experience the idea of the Trinity emerged. They began with their experience of the living God. The theology came second. I hope the same is still true, although I fear that sometimes we attempt to create experience on the basis of our theology and it never works.

Well we live by blind faith - on a wing and prayer - we see in a mirror dimly but some day we shall see.

We trust and hope perhaps that is riskier than signed-sealed-delivered explanation –

But what is faith if it is not prepared to run the risk?

At the end of the day,

I don't care a great deal whether you agree with the doctrine of the Trinity or not, or even whether you understand it.

Now before the heresy trial is convened and I'm charged with saying the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't matter, let me set the record straight.

I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I believe in one God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

I believe that God is one, but that the one God is known to us in three "persons".

And I actually do think that that's important. Important as an experience. The doctrine is important too,

but only as an attempt to make sense of the experience, and like falling in love, making sense of it is meaningless unless the experience is real first.

There are two reasons I want to touch on for why the Trinity is important as an explanation for our experience of God.

The first reason is that when our experiences of God are so diverse, it is important to decide whether or not we are still talking about one God.

As Frederick Buechner puts it, 'The doctrine of the Trinity is an assertion that, despite appearances to the contrary, there is only one God.

The God whose voice thunders across the chaos in creation, whose very word is enough to bring into being that which was not before, is the same God who sits weeping on a donkey sobbing, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you would have let me love you like a mother hen loves her chicks."

The God who hangs helpless, bleeding and choking to death on a crude wooden execution scaffold

is the same God who shakes the earth, bursting open prison doors and shattering the manacles from the feet of the prisoners.'

It's so absurd, so counter to the evidence at hand, that if God hadn't told us that this was him every time it would never have occurred to us.

The mystery of the mighty God of the cosmos, the mystery of the vulnerable God who walked among us, and the mystery of the God nudging and whispering within us are all the same mystery, the same God.

And if nothing else, then that means that you'd better not get too fixated on one aspect of the experience of God and start suggesting that it proves other images of God are wrong.

God will always be bigger, more diverse and more surprising than you can get your head around.

The second reason the Trinity is important as an explanation for our experience of God is that it tells us that God is by nature relational.

The perfect love relationship is not just a theoretical possibility, it is actually taking place constantly within God. God is not desperately combing the universe in a futile search for someone who can reciprocate the love that God longs to express. God exists as a love relationship.

Don't ask me to try to work out what the three persons of the Trinity would be if they stopped loving each other, I have no idea, but they would no longer be God and I suspect they would no longer have any power at all. But it won't happen so don't worry. God is love in action: the fullness of love in action. But, although God exists in perfect reciprocal love relationship, it is not a closed relationship.

That's what we saw when, without any disintegration of God, God became human, walking among us, and invited us into that love relationship. Jesus didn't come merely to suggest that we try to be loving, or to command us to act lovingly, or to condemn our lack of love.

Jesus came as the ultimate lover, as one who lives within the permanent experience of total love, to invite us into the experience of that love.

What's the difference?

- Well you don't have to measure up to some standard of love before you can approach God.
- You don't have to earn your way by your loving into the experience of God's love.
- You just have to respond to the invitation and enter into the experience of God's love and you will be transformed by it.

All the rest will follow.

When you enter into the experience of love within the heart of God, it is then that you will begin to dance with God in the ongoing work of creation and re-creation.

Like the description of the Spirit we heard in the Proverbs 8 earlier, you will work beside God like a skilled artist, delighting and rejoicing with God and in God and in all the works of God's hands.

If we want to be a people of light and truth in the world, a people who bring hope and creative change to a world in desperate need, then we must begin by ourselves journeying into the welcoming heart of the only power that can offer that hope and change, the power of love that burns unquenchably

in the dynamic relationship that is God of the Trinity.

Here is love. Here is nourishment for the journey. Here heaven and earth kiss one another and the dance of love takes another step forward.