

Understanding the Trinity

7 6 09

Almighty and eternal God,
you have revealed yourself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
and live and reign in the perfect unity of love;
hold us firm in this faith
that we may know you in all your ways
and evermore rejoice in your eternal glory
who are three persons yet one God,
now and for ever

Unusually, today's text is not to be found in any of our readings this morning but is taken from the end of Matthew's gospel, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (28 v19).

We have arrived at Trinity Sunday and next twenty weeks in the calendar of the Church are dedicated to the season of Trinity which makes Trinity longer than Christmas, Lent and Easter combined. The Trinity is an essential insight in our peculiar Christian understanding of the nature of the God in whom we believe and whom we worship. But the problem for us is what we believe is in one sense impossible. So how can we say, as Matthew urges us, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Firstly, it is useful to consider two different meanings of the word impossible. Impossible can mean just that: something that cannot happen because what we are asked to believe would not in reality be possible to replicate. To illustrate what I mean, let me turn to the best selling writer, Dan Brown whose books I can honestly not recommend. Why I went to see 'Anges et Démons', 'Angels and Demons' a fortnight ago I'm not sure. It was dubbed in French and there were no helpful subtitles but the action, not the dialogue, are the distinguishing feature of such a film. It was incredibly fast-moving, the bulk of the plot compressed into 24 hours and it was filmed largely on location in Rome. That said, it was incredible, totally unbelievable, fantastic only in the sense of being pure fantasy. There are too many impossibilities for me to list them here but let me content myself by mentioning two. The first is the gory use of someone else's eye to get through a retina-operated door. The problem was traces of blood from the eye were on the mechanism outside the door to get in while the victim whose eye the killer borrowed to get in lay dead inside! The other involved Ewan McGregor piloting a helicopter which was about to explode. Despite not wearing a parachute, he appears above St Peter's Square suspended by one only to be swept by the bomb blast helplessly against the stones and columns of the square; instead of being battered to death, he opens his smiling eyes. I suppose it's too much to ask fantasy to be real but if there is no realistic background against which the fantasy plays itself out, it devalues the genre.

The other type of impossibility is that which is impossible in logic. What is impossible about our belief and understanding of the nature of God is that he (and the use of the masculine pronoun to refer to God is in itself is open to

debate!) is that he is at one and the same time one God in three persons; that these three persons are at one and the same time entirely separate yet indivisible. Nothing in our known universe has 'precisely' this paradoxically reality: 1 in 3 and 3 in 1.

That said, having established why what we believe in believing in the Trinity is impossible does not mean that it is not a true reflection of ultimate reality. What it means is that God (and there should be no surprise here) is wholly different from us. God is outside of time and space, beyond the universe which he called into existence. He is so wholly different from us that we have no reference points that can accurately describe him. At best, we use poetry, images and allusions to suggest what he is like. That is why the Jewish and Islamic interdiction on images of God are spot on: to try to represent God in an image is to fall so far short of the divine reality, it is a waste of time to try to do so – blasphemy even. But what we believe, what is the centre of our faith, is that the unknown makes himself known in the person of the Son and that he continues to interact with us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

So I hope this Trinity Sunday I have again helped you to understand in part why what we believe in is logically impossible and why despite the constraints of our logic, it is reasonable to have faith in what we cannot logically understand: that the Trinity is a true reflection of the nature of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

7th June, 2009

H: Sermon 20: Trinity

