

Readings for Trinity Sunday

12th June 2022

First Reading: Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31

Thus says the wisdom of God: Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 'To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth – when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.'

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-5

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Gospel: St John 16:12-15

Jesus said to his disciples: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.'

A Reflection for Trinity Sunday

As soon as babies are born, they start to interpret the world around them using their senses. They quickly learn to distinguish the face, voice, touch, and smell of their parents from others. As they grow, they learn to identify grandparents, siblings, favourite toys, favourite foods and so on using those same senses. But there come points in our learning and understanding when using our senses directly is not sufficient.

When I was teaching chemistry, all serious study of the subject started with the structure of atoms, because atoms are the building blocks of molecules which make up all the substances on earth. Even you are made up of trillions of atoms, and each atom is made up of even smaller particles. Although they have been known about for a long time, atoms are far too small to see, and it was only in 2017 that the first picture of a single atom was published, and these aren't conventional pictures; pictures of atoms use a special technique called electron ptychography (I'll not go into details here!). Of course, when I was teaching about the fine detail of atoms that are too small to see, some of my pupils very properly asked me how we know this if it can't be seen. The answer is that it is the best model we have based on the evidence available. We deduce what it must be like from what happens in different circumstances. And so the ideas of what an atom is like have changed over the years as new experiments were done and conclusions drawn from them.

When we come to matters of theology, matters of faith, we have to do something similar, to use the available evidence to inform our understanding of things we can't see, hear or touch. That was what the early church had to try to do as it sought to come to a new understanding of God in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and their experience of the Holy Spirit.

Today is Trinity Sunday ... but nowhere in the Bible is the Trinity mentioned. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all mentioned many times of course, but not the Trinity, yet the doctrine of the Trinity is central to Christian belief. This doctrine has been described as one of most difficult aspects Christian theology. There are, I think, two related reasons for this: firstly, that our human minds which are finite are unable to fully grasp the nature of God who is infinite; secondly, the limitations of human language which cannot adequately describe God. God is a mystery. Saint Augustine is reputed to have said: if you can get your mind round it, it cannot be God.

But such limitations are no reason not to wrestle with the issue and try to learn a little more of God. Using Scripture, but also human experience and reason, over the first three centuries of the church's history, the Church Fathers debated and argued as they came to an understanding of how the three persons of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related; of how God who is transcendent and creator of all things revealed himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Their deliberations at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and later at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, resulted in the Nicene Creed that we still use today.

The Nicene Creed articulates the fundamental beliefs of Christianity including the doctrine of the Trinity, even though the word 'Trinity' doesn't appear here either. This doctrine is one that stretches our minds to their limits: one God but three persons, all one substance, so all fully divine; three persons who are distinct yet undivided; the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father but all are equal, each sharing in the life of the others, all involved in every action of God. It is unsurprising that, in attempting to explain this relationship, many different models have been used – last year Fr David used the image of wood sorrel or shamrock, and there are many others. They are helpful but ultimately, all of them break down, they are insufficient to completely describe the mystery that is God.

But perhaps having an excellent academic understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is not the most important thing we should aspire to. I think that our task is to learn and understand what we can and how it relates to how we live our lives. So what do today's readings tell us about the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer?

The passage from Proverbs speaks about a personified Wisdom in Trinitarian terms. It proclaims God as creator, presenting Wisdom as God's child, and the early church quickly identified Wisdom with Jesus. One of the difficulties with this passage, and one which certainly exercised the early church, is that it describes Wisdom as being created by God. A better and more orthodox translation would be that Wisdom is begotten of God, in the same way that, in the Creed, we describe Jesus as 'begotten, not made'. Wisdom is described as being there in the beginning with God, a similar idea to the Word of God in the opening of John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. Wisdom is also presented as having similarities with the Spirit of truth in today's Gospel passage. While Wisdom proclaims what has happened, the Spirit proclaims what will happen, and both glorify God.

At the time that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, the doctrine of the Trinity was far from being developed. Nevertheless, as he writes to the Roman church emphasising how Christians of different backgrounds are drawn together as one, we see all three persons of the Trinity described in interdependent relationship with one another. God's interdependent relationship within God is an example for humanity's relationship with God and with one another. We are brought into right relationship with God through Jesus, and in turn we are called to share this relationship by declaring God's glory. Paul also tells us that God's love given to us through the Holy Spirit helps us to respond to the inevitable times of suffering in life with endurance, character and hope.

In today's Gospel, we have another part of the Farewell Discourse of John's Gospel, some parts of which we have heard over the past few weeks. The setting is the Last Supper and the whole discourse, which extends from Chapter 13 to Chapter 17, has an overarching theme of love, as Jesus speaks of his imminent departure, gives instructions and provides comfort for his disciples. At various points, Jesus speaks of his love for his own, commands them to love another, describes the unity of Jesus with Father in love, that Jesus was sent because of God's love for world, and that believers are drawn into the love of the Father and the Son. Love underpins today's passage as Jesus draws the disciples into the Trinitarian relationship between the Spirit, the Son and the Father. He declares that all that the Father has is his also, and that the Spirit will take what is his and declare it to the disciples, guiding them into all truth.

As one commentator has put it, the Trinity can be understood as a way of seeing God as being for, with and in us, and ourselves as for, with and in God as children of God. Through Jesus' teaching and example of love, we learn of God's love for us and learn to love one another through the guiding of the Spirit.