

Sermon – Trinity Sunday 2014

Trinity Sunday: what does that mean to you?

The word “trinity” nowhere appears in the Bible. The church existed for 300 years before the doctrine of the trinity was agreed through the fourth century Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. As Christianity moved towards respectability, Emperor Constantine was disturbed at its lack of unity. The Council of Nicea was called to address these, and a number of other Councils followed, through which we gained our Nicene Creed.

The essential doctrine of the trinity holds (1) that there is only one God, (2) that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is each fully and eternally God (“consubstantial, co-eternal” as one traditional hymn puts it) and (3) that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons.

Whilst these three assertions are fully consistent with the Bible, they cannot be found in its text.

There are two verses in the Bible that mention the three persons together in a way that looks profoundly Trinitarian.

One of these verses is in our Gospel reading, “¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28.19). This verse is very familiar to us from its use in Christian baptism.

The other is in our Epistle reading, "13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13.13). This verse is very familiar as a prayer of greeting in corporate worship.

Having made this nod in the direction of Trinity Sunday, however, I should like to focus on our Gospel reading and on what God may be calling us to through what it says.

Chapter 28 is the last chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. It contains (vv 1-10) the resurrection of Jesus and his appearance to the women who had gone to the tomb, (vv 11-15) the report of the guards to the chief priests of what had happened at the tomb, and the passage that we have read today (vv 16-20), which we usually refer to as the Great Commission.

The last words of Jesus in St Matthew's Gospel are thus, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Who are these words for?

Well, yes, they were addressed to the remaining 11 disciples, the people in front of Jesus, at the time. We know that Peter got as far as Rome. Tradition has it that Thomas got as far as India. James did not get far, as he was the first to be martyred – executed on Herod’s orders. John got as far as Ephesus. We know little about what happened to the others.

These words, however, are for the Church as a whole.

There have been numerous instances of those who have been specifically called to missionary journeys, and we might think of some such as Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface or Willibrord, or others, closer to our own day, such as Dr. David Livingstone, C.T. Studd or Eric Liddell.

Such people are clearly superheroes of the faith. We praise them, listen to them and even support them in prayer, but as superheroes of the faith they are different from us.

If we are tempted to feel this way (and which of us has not felt something of this as appeals for missionary endeavour or Christian outreach of a more local nature are made). If we are tempted to feel this way, our Gospel reading calls us back. Consider the first two verses of our reading. The first sets the scene. The 11 disciples had gone to Galilee, and to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

The second verse is one of the strangest verses in the Bible (Matthew 28.17), “¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted”.

“¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted”.

This is the 11 disciples that we are reading about; the people who had spent 3 years as close followers of Jesus.

“¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted”.

What was Jesus’ reaction to this doubt?

We see none. It has been said (and I first heard it at an evangelical Anglican church in Oxford 45

years ago) that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.

God can cope with honest doubt in his followers.

Perhaps we might have expected Jesus to do some sifting out. Those who worship me, over here. Those who doubt over there. I only want fully convinced and committed followers. But no, no, no.

Jesus addresses his great commission to all of them, doubters included.

This is both a comfort and a challenge to us. However strong or weak we feel our faith to be, God wants us and loves us. However strong or weak we feel our faith to be, God calls us to look outwards and to share our Christian faith with others.

So, whatever other impact this Trinity Sunday may or may not have had on you, I hope that you will continue to ponder that verse immediately before the words of the Great Commission:

“¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted”.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith; doubt is not an escape from God's call to each of us to spread the Gospel.

Amen.

Revd John M. Overton
Assistant Curate, New Mills
15.6.2014