

Sermon preached at St.Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Trinity Sunday, 30th May 2021, by Barbara Doye.

The Dance at the Heart of the Atom

Reading: Romans 8 vv 12-17

The Sunday after Pentecost is designated Trinity Sunday. The Trinity. It's a name that sometimes fills preachers with dread. But the church I belonged to when I was growing up was called Trinity Methodist Church, and I also had a spell attached to Trinity Theological College, so it's always been a happy name for me. And as I have gone on in my Christian life, the Trinity, the Threeness of God- is something I have become more and more excited about. I would like to offer just a few ideas about the Trinity, the Threeinfolddness, (in German, the Dreifaltigkeit) of God, that I hope will make you feel excited as well.

First of all, do you know where the word Trinity first appears in the Bible? It's a trick question of course, because the word, doesn't appear in the Bible at all, nor does anything like it. It was probably coined by a theologian called Tertullian, but this wasn't until the late second century. And it took almost three centuries of Christian thought, discovery and discussion before the formula we know- that we worship One God in Three Persons, who we usually call the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was formally adopted by the Church at the Council of Nicea in 325, shown in the first picture below. Which was called of course by your friend and mine, the Emperor Constantine, the son of St.Helen. The Council was felt to be necessary because there were lots of different ideas current about about the nature of the relationship between God the Creator, Jesus the Man, and the Holy Spirit as the church knew and experienced Her.

The important word here is 'experienced'. Although there is no exact formula for the Trinity in the New Testament, we find the New Testament writers blithely using the words Father, Lord, God, Word, Jesus, Christ, and Spirit almost interchangeably from very early on, as our Bible reading from Romans shows. This was how God was experienced in the Early Church, and so their worship expressed that, just as ours does today. They experienced God as Everlasting- the Rock – as Ever-loving- the Christ, and as Ever-Present- the Spirit. Despite being resolutely monotheistic- remember the definitive Jewish prayer is 'Hear oh Israel ,the LORD our God, the LORD is One'- after the life of Jesus and events of Pentecost, the Church began to experience God in a way that came eventually to be called Three Persons, three 'soundings-through', like notes in a triad. So the Nicene Creed, has been the standard way ever since which the Christian Church has used to describe the Trinity.

So what does it mean to have a God in Three Persons- three 'soundings-through'? How might it change us as we meditate on this, now and in the future? First of all,

we need to accept that all our thinking about God is flawed. All our theology- our words about God- is imperfect. As St. Paul says, for now, we can only 'see in a mirror, dimly'. But I think the pictures we hold on to of God are really, really important, because they affect the way we see the world, and therefore how we shape our lives. I would like to share with you three pictures, of the Trinity that I find unhelpful, and three alternative ones that instead give me joy and hope.

,First, I don't think the Trinity is mathematical problem to be solved. I know some people find maths exciting, and I must say I do find triangles fascinating. But no-one has a relationship with a triangle. No-one falls in love with mathematical formula. Rather than a puzzle to be solved- so that if we get it right in our heads and then believe it we will somehow be OK-I think it is more helpful to think of the Trinity as a mystery to be explored. Remembering that a mystery doesn't mean something we can't understand, but something we can endlessly understand. This feels right to me, in a Universe that seems more and more mysterious the more we know about it. As we look into the constituents of matter, we are discovering that buried at its heart seems to be a pattern of constantly shifting relationships. Atoms, the particles we thought were indivisible, turn out to be made up of protons, neutrons and electrons. They in turn, turn out to be made of even smaller particles, but we can only observe these by the effect they have on others. Matter, it seems, is about relationships. A mystery to be explored.

Next, I have come to appreciate that, although it took the Church sometime to develop the concept of Trinity, this doesn't mean that the nature of God changed over time. It was as early Christians looked back into the Old Testament that they found evidence that the way they were experiencing The Divine One was always the way the Divine had been experienced. Do you remember the Spirit of God 'brooding over the face of the waters' in Genesis? The Wisdom of God who was present at Creation in Proverbs? The three visitors who appeared to Abraham under the oak tree? These are all examples that are used to express the idea that from before the beginning of time, God was somehow in relationship with Godself. We could think of it like this: the dance inside the atoms reflects the Dance which has always been happening between the Persons of the Trinity. And so in fact the whole Universe is an overflow of the dynamic Love which flows between the Holy Three. And this is not a new development, but an ancient truth, constantly being re-discovered.

Finally, I think it's really important to hang on to the idea that a good model of the Trinity is not a pyramid with God the Father at the top. It's not an isosceles triangle, where the Son and the Spirit are somehow additional extras. I am afraid that this is how we quite often conduct our prayer and our thinking about God. The key affirmation of the Council of Nicea was that the Three Persons are completely equal, and have been since the beginning. Equal in Might, in Majesty, in Glory. This was so important that it caused a lot of consternation at the Council, including an incident where, allegedly, St. Nicholas of Myrna got so upset that he got up and slapped Arius, who was denying that Jesus was an equal member of the Trinity. This incident

frequently gets depicted in iconography, as the second picture below shows. So there we are, Father Christmas defends the equality of the Trinity. I'm not suggesting this is helpful way of settling theological differences, or any differences, frankly. But holding onto the idea it expresses might be very helpful. You see, where there are Two Persons, there can be a relationship, but where there are Three Persons, there is a Community. And if God is an equal Community, each ever-loving and each constantly emptying into the other, than this is the pattern for all of life. Community is what we are made from, and what we are made for. Nothing can have become clearer to us in the past fifteen months. This, the Dance at the heart of the atom, is the Dance that we are being asked to join. There is room for us, and for all of creation, in the Loving Dance of the Holy Trinity. I think that's exciting.

So,

Not a puzzle to be solved, but a mystery to be explored.

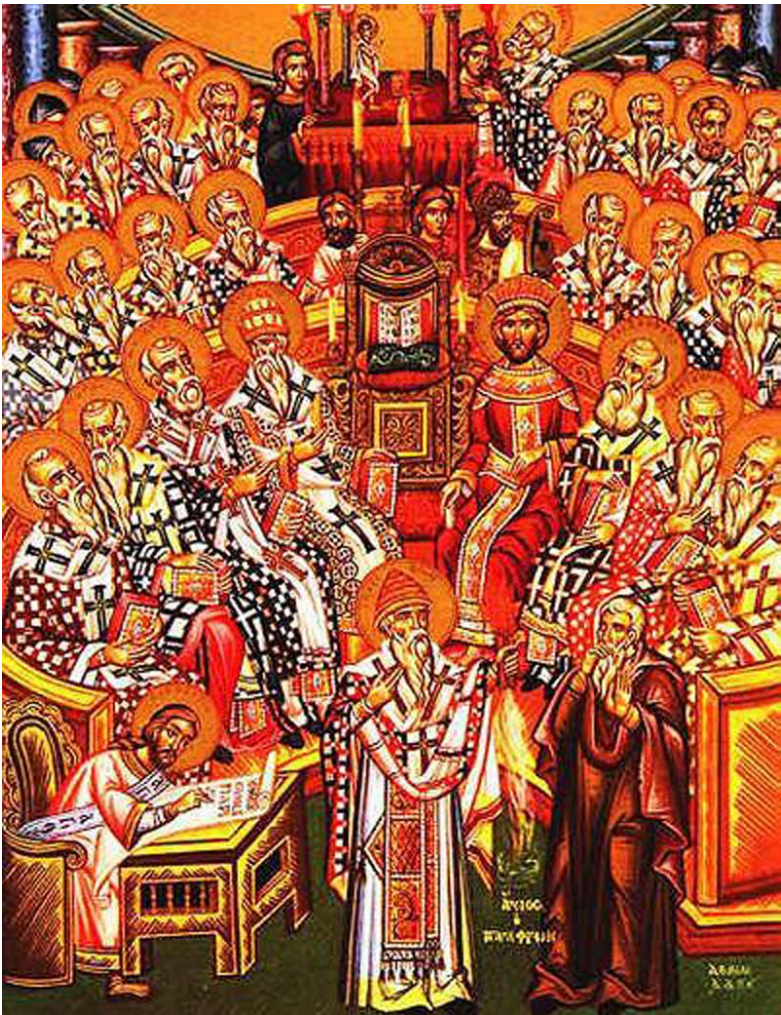
Not an historical development, but an ancient truth.

Not an unequal triangle, but a loving, equal, non-binary Community.

May the Holy Trinity continue to draw us into the Dance, now and into eternity.

Amen.

Icon of the Council of Nicea



Icon of St. Nicholas and Arius

