

The Parish of Wellow

Searching Issues

How can God be 'three persons in one'?

Passage, Sermon Notes and Questions

Please feel free to take these sermon notes home with you and you may wish to find some time during next week to consider the questions below.

1. Sermon Passage

Matthew 28:16-20

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

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

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

2. Sermon Notes

2.1 A difficult question

How would we respond to a friend, a member of our family or a colleague who said the following: "I understand that Christians believe in the Trinity but the Trinity certainly isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible. And anyway, if I have grasped what Christians mean by the Trinity, are you seriously suggesting that it is believable that God can be three people all rolled in one person. It is just this sort of nonsense that makes Christians look so ridiculous."

2.2. Three Issues to deal with

Is the Doctrine of the Trinity?

- A. Biblical
- B. Believable
- C. Relevant

2.3 Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Biblical?

- The word 'Trinity' does not appear anywhere in the Bible.
- The word 'Trinity' was first used by an early Christian writer called Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch in c. AD 180.
- But a learned professor has remarked, 'Let us not be misled by the foolish argument that because the word "Trinity" does not occur in the scriptures, the doctrine of the Trinity is therefore unscriptural.'
- The idea that God is 'three persons in one' permeates the pages of the New Testament.
 - i. Matthew 28:19 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'
 - ii. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with what we now call 'The Grace': 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' 2 Corinthians 13: 14.
 - iii. The Apostle Paul sees virtually every aspect of the Christian faith and life in Trinitarian terms. In 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6 Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit in this way: 'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.'
 - iv. In 2 Thessalonians 2: 13-14 Paul sees the Trinity as taking the initiative and providing both the means and the goal of salvation: 'God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit... that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ'
- However, it has to be said that despite these and many other similar passages we find in the New Testament, there is no formal creedal statement about the Trinity.
- The early church originally simply experienced the reality of God as Father; Son and Holy Spirit.
- It was not until 381 A.D. that the Church did at last define a coherent and systematic Doctrine of the Trinity.

2.4 Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Believable?

- How can Christians believe and at the same time worship 'One God in Trinity?' It does not seem possible or understandable.
- God cannot be contained or limited by the extent of human knowledge. Certainly we have to concede that the Trinity is not an easy doctrine to understand.
- We are dealing here with the very nature of God himself, so it is not surprising that God stretches the limits of our understanding.
- One of the greatest theologians of the church, Augustine of Hippo, wrote fifteen volumes on the Trinity. Yet even he never delved the full depths of this doctrine.
- God cannot be put in a neat box and easily understood.

However when dealing with difficult truths it is sometimes helpful to use analogies - Jesus did this through the use of parables - using ordinary everyday things to explain complicated theological truths. We can do the same with the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Some useful analogies:

- i. A triangle has three sides but it is still one triangle.
- ii. A shamrock - each of the three portions of the leaf is an essential part of that leaf, but the leaf itself is greater than all its parts.
- iii. The Union Jack is made up of the combination of the flags of St George, St Andrew and St Patrick.
- iv. Water, ice and steam all have the same chemical formula: H₂O. But we see this one substance in three different forms namely water, ice and steam.
- v. A Book - A book exists in three different and distinct ways at once - in the mind of the author; on the shelf in the library and in the imagination of the reader.
- vi. A house. The architect (God the Father) can say, 'It's my house.' The purchaser (God the Son) can say, 'It's my' house.' And the tenant (God the Spirit) can say, 'It's my house.'

The difficulty with all these analogies is that they are impersonal, and at best are imperfect ways of trying to explain the unexplainable. There will always be things about God that we cannot fully understand, but because we cannot understand them this does not mean to say that they are unbelievable.

2.4 Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Relevant?

- The doctrine of the Trinity is highly relevant to us all because it sheds light on the nature of the God who we are in relationship with and how he relates to us.
- To ignore the Doctrine of the Trinity is a bit like saying that we are not interested in getting to know our best friend.

3. Questions to consider back at home

3.1 Why did the early church adopt the Doctrine of the Trinity?

3.2 Why does Islam, Judaism, The Jehovah Witnesses and others find the Doctrine of the Trinity so repugnant?

3.3 Is it true to say that the bible makes no reference to the Trinity?

3.4 What does Jesus mean when he says 'baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'?

3.5 Does the Apostle Paul accept the idea of God being 'three persons in one'? Do Paul's views differ to those of Jesus?

3.6 Is it reasonable to accept that just because we cannot fully explain or prove something that it therefore cannot exist? Can you think of any other concepts or ideas that we accept without a full proof or explanation?

3.7 Of the six analogies used to explain the Trinity: which do think in the best, which do think is the worst and which is your favourite?

3.8 Over a drink one day down at the pub a friend says that "He simply cannot understand why anyone other than a Theologian would want to consider the Doctrine of the Trinity" How would you respond?

If you would like to discuss these questions further please feel free to call me on 01761 432293