

Trinity Sunday 2019

Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13.11-end; Matthew 28.16-20

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week at Pentecost, Patrick challenged us to remember that the Spirit of God is a *sending* spirit and he suggested that we recognised this in the words associated with sending: words like mission, message, mass.

The theme of sending is taken up in our Gospel today where Jesus sends the disciples to preach to all the nations and baptize them in the threefold name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Never mind that those last words were probably added by a later generation of Christians than Matthew's generation, and then read back into his Gospel. They reflect what the early Church discovered as it took up Christ's mission to preach and baptize. Christianity always has been a missionary religion. There is an urgency about the good news. The inwardness, the contemplation, that I have been trying to encourage during the retreat of these few days is only one side of the story. The other is about being out there in the real world, living as if we believed that God is indeed love.

Three years ago on Palm Sunday the Coptic Cathedral in Alexandria was bombed by ISIS and 45 people were killed. A video was posted on Facebook giving the response of the Egyptian Church, which was to stand together in public and recite the Nicene Creed.

You might think that is an extraordinary thing to do. Yet the Copts revealed something about the nature of their faith which I find both inspiring and, if I'm honest, rather shaming. I think by reciting the Creed they were much more in tune with the faith of the early Christians than we are. The early Christians treated their creeds as something special. A creed, like our Apostles' Creed, was given in baptism as a sacred symbol of that God had done for each person in particular and for all humanity. The Nicene creed came later in response to doctrinal controversy. And it is the way it is because the point of it is to declare God's nature as love. The love that comes from God reflects the love within God's being. Early Christians remembered the Creed clause by clause, not as any kind of dry intellectual exercise, but as a way of forming their Christian identity, each phrase to be engraved on the heart, so that every Christian had the mystery of the Christian faith accessible day and night, the source of Christian character and resilience.

In the West and perhaps particularly in Western Protestantism we don't do that so much. Faith is much more a private matter to do with our ideas about things, or our values and emotions, or the people we like to hang out with. And when it comes to God we often indulge in a kind of serial monotheism. (You've heard about serial monogamy? It means being married to a number of people one after the other – but only one at a time) Well serial monotheism is like that. So we pray to God the Father who turns out to be a collective image of all the father figures we have ever met – very old, very powerful, very male. And then we pray to Jesus who is wandering around in Galilee wearing a long robe of pyjama material. And we try to relate to him as one of us, as a kind friend or brother. And then once a year, last Sunday, we remember the Holy Spirit and think of doves and flames of fire.

And the problem of that is that it means we are treating the persons of the Trinity as individuals, as though they were two men, Father and Son with a pet, a dove or whatever as the third. I don't

think this is what the Coptic martyrs died for. Or why their fellow Christians protested by reciting the Nicene Creed.

Because what the Nicene Creed declares to us is that our true life, our true humanity is patterned within the being of God. What are mortals that you should be mindful of them? Mere human beings that you should seek them out? Not quite like other animals, and certainly not angels, but persons.

The Trinity is revelation, disclosure. It suggests that when we are thinking and speaking of God we need to let ourselves be drawn in deeper than we might imagine. So we speak in the Creed of Christ as, 'begotten, not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things were made', and of the Holy Spirit as 'the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.' St Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace'. This is what it is like to mirror the life of God in which equality and difference are held together.

This is such a challenge for us and for our world. We naturally tend to think of human society as a hierarchy: what matters is who controls and who submits. From time to time we revolt against those who rule us, but then the revolt itself becomes oppressive and the whole cycle begins again. Even in our democracies we struggle. On almost every social and political issue the claim for genuine equality and the claim for genuine diversity are at war with one another. If everyone is equal there can be no difference. If difference is allowed, there will be inequality. And it seems to me that we humans, we mortals are trapped in this problem, which breaks out as prejudice, entitlement, resentment and violence. The murder of George Floyd was one of those moments when the cracks appeared in the heart of the most advanced of the Western nations and we saw something of the ugliness of the human spirit. What could be more oppressive than kneeling on someone's neck, or more terrible than the cry I can't breathe. We have been listening to that cry and its consequences in recent days. Sometimes we should consider, are we in fact, the weight bearing down on one another, or is it that the weight of others is bearing down on us. In either case we are trapped in what Christian tradition calls sin. Victim and persecutor, oppressor and oppressed. The Coptic Christians after the murder three years recited the Creed as an act of defiance, to say, we refuse to be defined as the enemies of peace. We refuse the prejudice. And to their persecutors, we refuse to see you as enemies. It is the Trinity that teaches us to be human, to be persons. Though we remain mortal men and women, we are made in the image of the triune God, and it is the triune God who saves us from hell on earth and beyond this life.

Seen in this light the Creed safeguards the Gospel. Eternal life is found in dying to our one-dimensional selves, dying to our selfishness, our isolating cleverness, our desolating anxiety, even ultimately our victimhood. 'The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought', says the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, and he expands this, 'If we reject the Trinity as the sole ground of all reality, we are committed to a road which leads nowhere...we end in folly, in the disintegration of our being, in spiritual death. Between the Trinity and hell there is no choice'. That, I think is what the Coptic Christians understood.