

Global Trinity: Matthew 28: 16-20; Isaiah 40: 12-17, 27-31

Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Trinity Sunday 07/06/2020

Before lockdown began, I was fortunate enough to go on a Christian pilgrimage to Turkey. That may sound strange: we know Jesus never went there and we think of Turkey as a Muslim country. However, our tour leader encouraged us to think of this area as the nursery of the church. He added that while pilgrims to the Holy Land go for their personal faith, this pilgrimage was more about the shared faith of the church. So, we visited some of the Seven Churches of Asia named in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, in which the Spirit gives messages for these individual churches that had suffered Roman persecution. A couple of hundred years later, this area (now Western Turkey) had become a Christian heartland. It was here that the great ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries were held – Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. Ecumenical means ‘for the whole world’: here, at particular geographic locations, at particular dates in history, work was being done for the whole world and for the whole of Christian history. That work involved defining key doctrines of the church. Crucially, they asked, who is Jesus? How can we talk about him as both man and God? And secondly, pertinent for this Sunday, what is the Trinity? How can we talk about God being both Three and One? Their conclusions are contained in what we say as the Nicene Creed.

I certainly am not going to try to go through the seemingly labyrinthine discussions held in those councils. As with all human activities, there was clearly a mixture of personality, power, politics and indeed prejudice going on as well as true theology. What is important is that the councils did not ‘invent’ the Trinity. People often say the Trinity doesn’t appear in the Bible. It’s true that the word Trinity doesn’t occur, but Scripture talks of Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit in the same way as it speaks of God whom Jesus called Father. The councils recognised the only way to be true to Scripture is to talk of Father, Son and Spirit as the One God in Three Persons. To suggest the Trinity did not exist before the councils is like claiming gravity didn’t exist before the apple (allegedly) fell on Isaac Newton’s head. Reality exists: Discovering its nature can take a long time!

The final scene of Matthew’s Gospel has the risen Jesus meeting his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Verse 17 says ‘When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted (or hesitated).’ We tend to assume their doubts were about whether or not Jesus could be truly alive again, but the real question was whether you can worship as God someone you’ve known as a man: they knew the commandment to ‘worship the Lord your God and him alone.’ They didn’t have the benefit of the Nicene Creed to tell them he is ‘God from God, light from light ... begotten, not made.’ From their worship, witness naturally followed. From that holy mountain, a message flowed out to the whole world that would withstand the centuries: Jesus is Lord.

It seems to me that if we don't get the Trinity right, we mess up our worship. Trinitarian worship opens our hearts and minds to the wonder of God beyond telling. We read earlier the magnificent words from Isaiah, offering a global vision of God's majesty. 'Who has understood the mind of the Lord ... who has measured the oceans with his hand ... and weighed mountains in his scales?' The prophet is getting his people to lift their heads above their immediate problems and see that God has a whole different vantage point and works on a completely different scale. It's by that vision that worship is transformative: 'Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not grow faint.' We know that this self-same God who spans the cosmos also has come to us as our brother, Jesus, and lived a normal human life. We know this self-same God has come upon us as Holy Spirit and tenderly breathed life into our inner being. God is global, God is local, God is personal. Worship God ... with hearts and hands and voices ... in the beauty of holiness ... in the privacy of the home and (when we can) in full public view ... online and in the 'real' world ... in all the stages of our lives ... in unity with all manner of diversity whilst sure of our unity ... through service and self-sacrifice ... sharing with the whole of creation: 'let everything that has breath praise the Lord. O praise the Lord' (Psalm 150: 6).

Worship of God the Holy Trinity leads us out in witness. 'All authority is given to me,' says Jesus: authority of God the Creator, authority of the human whose been through it all. You have my authority to go. Go make disciples of all nations.

You, first generation disciples are all Jews, but you're to make disciples of all nations – ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, backgrounds. To make disciples you'll have to teach: although God is within them all they won't know it until they've been told. And go on teaching, because there's always more to learn about God and how God wants people to live in his world. And you'll have to baptise, because through baptism comes the next generation of disciples. When you baptise, do so in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so they'll know they belong to God who is Three-in-One, and that they too go with the authority of God the One-in-Three.

This is the mission of God, Father, Son and Spirit. It's a global mission, which requires the big vision of God to inspire it. Instinctively, therefore, his followers see needs across the world as those of our neighbours. Instinctively, we recognise our vocation to care for God's planet. Instinctively, we wish to share the Good News of Jesus with those far and near. God in Trinity is global, and calls us to think in that scale. God in Trinity is local, and calls us to be grounded in our communities. God in Trinity is intimate, and operates deep within us, renewing and reviving our strength.

In the era of lockdown, many of us have been so deeply grateful for the knowledge of God in our homes and our hearts – God who's kept us going – and also have rejoiced in the beauty of God's world around us in our neighbourhoods. God in Trinity also calls us to look up and look out, and to get involved. Lift your eyes to see what God may be doing today, worship, and find a way to join in.