

Sermon on Trinity Sunday 1996

(St Andrews Church, St Andrews)

Trinity Sunday is a difficult day for preachers, who often feel they have to try to explain the idea of God as Trinity. It's sometimes an even more difficult day for congregations, who have to listen to preachers trying to explain the Trinity.

It's a difficult day for preachers because we find we have to talk about God. You may think preachers are always talking about God, but in my experience most preachers actually talk rather little about God. They talk a lot about what God wants of us. If they're good preachers, they talk even more of what God has done for us and is doing for us. That, after all, is the Gospel. But they don't talk very much about who God is. Perhaps they leave that to the liturgy and the hymns, which probably do it better than sermons usually can.

Talking about God - by which I mean, not just referring to God, but actually trying to say who God is - is one of those points where language fails us. All of you will know the experience of wanting to say something really significant - to tell someone how important they are to you, or to tell someone how deeply sorry you are - and the usual phrases come nowhere within reach of what you really want to say. The only words you can find are terribly makeshift, but on the other hand you *must* use them. Not to say anything would be worse. You must say what you can and hope the words point to what you can't really say.

We have to talk about God. We live in a society which has largely forgotten what the word 'God' means. People think God is some fairytale figure in the sky. We cannot depend on the word 'God' meaning for most people anything remotely like the God we know in Jesus Christ. We must talk about who God is. At the same time we know that words cannot sum God up or pin God down. All we can do is use words which point to what cannot be said. It's important to talk about God. It's important, when we talk about God, to realise that God is infinitely more than can be said.

There are several Christian ways of trying to say who God is. The one that says the most about God is the one we use in the creeds, when we say we believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God is those Three and the Three are one God. The Christian shorthand for that is: God is Trinity. But if that says the most about God, it is also the most difficult thing Christians say about God, and so I shall try to come round to it by an easier route. Instead of going straight to the Trinity, I shall talk first about two other ways in which Christians try to say who God is. These two other ways of talking about God will help us, I hope, to see what the Trinity means.

The first is the simple statement: God is love. The statement comes from the New Testament. It's one of the most important things the Bible says. And you might think this is really all we need to say about God: God is love. Isn't this simple statement enough? The trouble is: what does love mean? We use the word 'love' in all kinds of ways. 'I love chocolate cake': is that the sort of love God is? 'We made love': is that the sort of love God is? We say we love people when what we mean is a selfish, possessive sort of love that damages people. Love can be a destructive

obsession. Love can be self-indulgent sentimentality. Love can be vaguely wishing someone well. Love can be all kinds of things or sometimes nothing at all.

So 'God is love' is only going to mean something if we can spell out what God's love means. So we come to the second way of talking about God. This is talking about God by telling the story of God's love for the world. That's the way the Bible spells out what it means to say that God is love. It tells us about God's love in much the best way of talking about love: it tells us about God's love in practice. The best way that you can know what someone's love for you is like is seeing what it means in practice. The Bible tells us what sort of love God is by telling the story of God's love for us. It tells how God created the world out of love, and the story of how God continued to love the world he had created and got involved with it in his love for us. It tells how even when we rejected God's love and spoiled God's world with evil, still God went on loving us and did all he could to rescue us from evil and to win our love for him. That's the Old Testament story of God's involvement with the people of Israel. It's the story that comes to a climax with Jesus, when God in his love for us sent his Son to be actually one of us, to live a human life with us and to die for us. It's the story that continues with God's loving presence in the Holy Spirit, in the church, in our lives. The story of God's love for the world goes on: we're part of it.

The story tells us who God is because we see what kind of love God is. God is self-giving love. He doesn't just sit up in heaven and wish us well. He gets involved with us in his love for us. He gives himself for us in costly self-sacrifice in Jesus' suffering and death for us. He gives himself to us when he gives us his Holy Spirit as the gift of himself present with us in our lives. 'God is love' means that God gives himself - for us and to us. That is God's nature.

But there's something else to notice about that story of God's love for the world. I *can* only tell that story by talking about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I've already done so. I couldn't help it. When we see God's love in action, we see not only God the Father who cares for us like a parent for his children. We also see God the Son, who loves us by coming alongside us as Jesus, as our human brother, one of us, living and dying for us. And we also see God the Holy Spirit, who comes into our very being, who loves us, as it were, from the inside. God the Father cares for us, nurtures us, watches over us, directs us in his love. God the Son is God in loving solidarity with us, God as Jesus, with us in our human world, giving himself for us in his human life and death. And God the Holy Spirit is God's love in the depths of our being, sharing God's love with us so that we can love with God's love. It is only because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that God can love us in the way he does. Only because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that God can be caring, self-sacrificial, self-giving love.

So we really need all three ways of talking about God. We need to say that God is love. We need to tell the story of God's love for the world: what God's love is in practice. Then we also need to say: God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is another way of saying that God is love, another way of telling the story of God's love. God loves us as the Father, as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. So when we find the doctrine of the Trinity difficult and puzzling, we should ask ourselves: how could we tell the story otherwise?

However, we need to take one further step, which is the most difficult. I've been talking about God's love *for us*. But if God *is* love, God's love must be more than his love for us. God is love in his very being, quite apart from us. Even before we existed, even before God created the world, God was love in his own being. God didn't start loving when he loved his creation. God's love for us is the overflowing of the love that God is eternally. And that can be so because, again, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's being is the love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

An illustration may help, though it's no more than an illustration. Think of a very loving family, one in which people are devoted to each other. But not the sort of family whose love is a closed circle, excluding other people. This is the sort of family that is always befriending other people. The family's own love is constantly being shared with others. Other people are welcomed into the home and made to feel they're virtually part of the family.

You must have come across families like that. But it only happens when there really is love within the family. There has to be love between the members of the family so that they can share that love with others and open their loving relationships to embrace others. Others feel welcome, they can feel they belong to the family, because there is a loving family there already. It's a little like that with God. It's the eternal love within God, the love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which God shares with us. When God sends his Son into the world to befriend us and when God sends his Spirit into our hearts, God is opening up his own life of love for us to share in. It's like being welcomed into the family.

In conclusion, it seems to me there are two mistakes people commonly make about the idea of the Trinity, which I hope you will now be able to see are mistakes. One is that the doctrine of the Trinity is some sort of rarefied theological speculation, the kind of thing theologians amuse themselves with in their studies, but nothing to do with real Christian life. On the contrary, the doctrine of the Trinity is what we must believe if we really grasp that amazing truth of the Gospel: that God himself in his love has really come into our world as Jesus Christ and that God himself in his love has really come into our own experience as the Holy Spirit.

The other mistake is to think that in a mere formula - the Trinity - we've got God within the grasp of our minds, as though now we actually understand God. Not at all. The doctrine of the Trinity takes us *into* the mystery of who God is, but it does not explain or dispel the mystery. When we know God as Trinity we truly know God, but we by no means understand God.

God the Trinity is the love we find in Jesus Christ and experience in the Holy Spirit. God the Trinity is the mystery of love we can experience but never understand.