

SERMON FOR TRINITY SUNDAY | 11 June 2017

Sitting outside in the Vicarage garden last night in the warmth of the Pocket Prom, listening to some sublime Mozart played by students from Guildhall and then some lively jazz, my mind kept returning to the question I asked in the sermon last Sunday.

If you remember, last Sunday was Pentecost, the day when we remember the way God sent the Spirit of Jesus onto his disciples and the first leaders of the Church, so that they could have a direct hotline to heaven - and as a result could know what and how to share the Good News of what God was about from that moment on.

We recalled the way the disciples then rushed down to the very cosmopolitan crowd outside – and how everyone heard them talking about God “in their own language” – by which I meant not necessarily different ethnic languages but sheer comprehensibility.

Those who were here will remember me then going on to ask: if that is the case, just how much do you understand of what is going on in Church – either in the sermons or in our Masses generally.

The reply was not encouraging: between 2-50%! Perhaps you were teasing me: perhaps you weren't!

Not surprisingly this has been niggling away at me all week. How is it that we share so many words and yet the real key to what we are about, here in Church, doesn't get through?

In a funny kind of way, the election clarified some of my ideas – but not in a particularly good way! Like you, I kept wondering just when the politicians, right across the board – were going to answer the questions that they were asked. They seemed to do everything they could to tell you what they wanted to say rather than what we wanted to hear.

Time and time again the great interviewers, the Dimplebys, Jeremy Paxman and especially this year Jane Garvey on Woman's Hour, got more and more rattled as our political leaders failed to answer – or sometime didn't even know – the answers. And then there was Ellie. On Thursday and Friday of this week I have been helping Richard Cloudesley School with their RE programme.

The children at Richard Cloudesley are almost all wheel-chair bound – and almost all of them have quite severe learning difficulties on top of their physical problems.

The theme of this fairly intense couple of days was ‘stories’ and the coordinator asked me to bring in a familiar Christian story – to stand alongside stories in the Sikh, Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist traditions which they were also looking at.

Given all the things these young people have to cope with, we chose the story of David and Goliath - which, I appreciate is really from the Jewish Hebrew Bible but it is very familiar to us too. I picked it because it was all about someone overcoming huge disadvantages.

In the last session, for the sixth formers who I know quite well now as many of them have helped serve lunches at Pack-Up on Monday’s (*Pack-Up is the weekly soup kitchen for the street community in St James’ Hall*) I was talking about the meaning of the story when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, how one of the students, Ellie – with pretty good communication skills – was ‘translating’ what I was saying (via sign language and simplifying my sentences) for the benefit of Aasif who was drawn up next to her.

And out of watching Ellie, a number of things came to mind. The first was just how close these two had become over the years as students at Richard Cloudesley. So, whenever Aasif gets stuck he naturally turns to Ellie for help. But the help Ellie gives doesn’t get in the way of Aasif’s relationship with the people he is talking to: Ellie has a particular knack of acting as an interpreter, a ‘go-between’, which still leaves space for Aasif to be himself with those he is talking to. And yet without her, the conversation would have been infinitely more difficult.

Which flies in the face of the old playground maxim which I remember hurt me so much when I was very young and trying to make friends: “two’s company, three’s a crowd...” Ouch!

As we come to this special day in the calendar, Trinity Sunday, the Church asks us to wrestle once more with the idea of God being both One - and Three. Which is no easy task: back to our 2% understanding answer!?

Because we have all heard the usual descriptions: God the Father made the world; God the Son is Jesus who was sent on earth to show us the way to heaven: God the Holy Spirit is the power of God working in the world today. And, to be honest, we in the Church are often hard put to it to defend ourselves against the Muslim charge that there are three God's in the Christian pantheon.

So we have to find other ways of explaining the Trinity; we need an Ellie to simplify the idea and to use other words. And we can only do that by the use of similies: it is like – and then some.

Because the picture we are being given is of what happens when true love draws people together at a completely new level. It's more than the meeting of minds – or even the meeting of hearts. It is as if they almost morph in into one person. Lovers can be like that and it is wonderful - but that is quite a closed relationship: one on one. What happens if you extend that to three people? That is a very different ball game altogether. As I suggested earlier, two can be close - very close, but three? Not a crowd exactly but the dynamics are very much more difficult and are rarely precisely equal.

But that is the image God is holding out to us: not just the closeness of romantic lovers but the open, interdependent and equal sharing between three – with different gifts, different skills and abilities – yet utterly at the service of one another and completely open to those around them.

Of course there have been, famously, a three way relationship in the headlines this week: the two special advisers to Theresa May. Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill as her chiefs of staff had created such a tight-knit trio with the Prime Minister that others have found it impossible to become a part of their relationship. Apart from that being wholly undemocratic, it was also the kind of exclusivity which was paralysing for those around them.

So the idea that we can see God in three different ways is a good start when we try to talk about the Trinity. But it is much more than that: when Jesus talks about him and his father 'being one' he is talking about something far deeper. Because of their deepest possible feelings of love, there is such a unity between them that even their different roles and personas cannot make space for difference. Totally three – but also totally one.

But why the three-legged stool on our pew sheet today? Why is this also used as a simile for the Trinity? I think the idea is that three legs are more stable than two – and certainly more inclusive.

Anglicans have frequently used this three legged approach to the spiritual life in their teaching, saying that each of us needs three things to grow in faith: the Bible, Church Teaching or Tradition – and the spiritually led gift of common sense! For a balanced clue to the words and works of God, you need all three of these – in balance.

As this week has shown, trying to define the Trinity is best seen through experience: the experience of how wonderful real closeness is; how a third person like Ellie can often explain and interpret the situation for someone – and they do it best when they don't then get in the way; that the best of communities, even of three, are outward looking and not inward looking; and finally the three great supports of the Bible, Tradition and Common Reason (or Reason) are always in danger of skewing our relationship with God unless we are taking note of the other two at the same time.

Wouldn't be easier, like the Unitarians we spoke about the other week, just to believe that there is one God, that Jesus was a good man and that we can find our way to heaven without the Holy Spirit? Simple maybe, but too easy altogether. It is in the love of the Three and the power that flows from that relationship that takes us over and makes us want to be more like God.

In the words of my favourite passage from Isaiah, read today as our 1st Reading: *Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on eagle's wings; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*