

SERMON FOR TRINITY SUNDAY | 07.06.2020

Isaiah 40: 12-17, 27-end; 2 Corinthians 17: 11-end; St John 7: 14-18, 37-41

There used to be a time when people would openly ask what newspaper you read as a way of trying to discover where your political loyalties lay. But so few read newspapers these days that this approach won't work anymore; we get our news from a huge range of TV channels, websites and blogs. Equally in the 'old days' Anglican Christians would be asked what hymn book they used in Church to find out if they were high church, broad church or low! Of course that has all gone too as local parish service booklets have replaced the need to juggle printed prayer books and hymn books.

More serious is our choice of Bible translation; the selection of particular words has a huge, often subliminal, influence on what we think we believe. While some find the old King James' version they were brought up with comforting and others prefer translations with more clarity and simplicity the key question is: which is more accurate to the original? Whatever version we prefer it is vital that the basic meaning isn't changed – sometimes easier said than done.

As many people have pointed out, the result of all this picking and mixing can lead us down the road marked 'relativism': there are no absolute truths any more. Everything needs to be understood in the light of present experience. Adjusting the facts to suit current opinions has always been around but it has come under particular scrutiny recently after Tweets from the White House started to be put through the equivalent of the 'spell checker'!

In the face of so many conflicting ideas, then, where can we find 'the truth' – and then learn to live with it - not alter it?

Today, Trinity Sunday, takes us into one of the hardest topics in the Christian faith. I start each sermon by asking God's blessing on what is to follow – and I do it by saying: + In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – and making the sign of the Cross as I do it. But can I take you to a Bible and show you a clear explanation of this three-fold name? No I can't.

Not even if I took a pencil and altered the words of the Bible itself. But I leave that trick to the Jehovah's Witnesses who, in various places in the New Testament – especially in the first chapter of St John's Gospel, have simply re-written the words to make them fit what they want to believe. But we will come back to that later.

Because, as we said last week when we were thinking about the use of language, even an apparently insignificant change in a translation can affect a whole series of other issues. For example: were the women mentioned by St Paul in the New Testament ordained deacons or just servants... ? Some read the Greek one way, others in a completely opposite direction. And translate the verses to fit whatever conclusion they reached.

So when the Early Church tried to put together a coherent statements about God - a kind of Creed or statement of faith for the newly baptised - they found themselves saying 'we know what we believe – but we can't find all the evidence we need in the Bible'. They picked endlessly over the Gospels and the writings of St Paul, and they found hints here and hints there of the way the three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – related to one another. But there was no definitive guide anywhere; and so they had to try to write one.

Which is where language let them down. There, in 2 Corinthians 13: 14 is one of the most familiar lines of the Bible: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* But as Jews they could not get their heads around the fact that three names must mean three physical bodies or entities. How could they reconcile that with the truth that God is one AND that Jesus his Son was equally God?

Towards the end of the 2nd century there was a definite shift in the Church from Jewish to Greek ways of understanding 'being'. Instead of talking about 'bodies' (three beings, taking up three physical spaces), the Greek way of thinking about God was more 'metaphysical' ie it talked about 'identities' in ways that overcame or were 'above' physical matter.

It was Justin Martyr (who was the first to write down what an Early Church Mass was like) who had the first attempt - but he ended up describing Jesus as 'another God'.

Clearly that was a step too far: for Jewish Christians there simply couldn't be two (or even three) Gods. So a group called the Monarchists (named from the belief that God the Father was the supremely divine 'monarch') preached that Jesus was not equal to God at all – that he had only 'come from' or 'been derived from' God. While his 'mode of appearance' gave him the appearance of God, in reality, they said, he had only been 'adopted' by God the Father so that we humans could experience something of the love of God for ourselves through this divinely inspired human being.

In the opposite direction, another group called the Docetists came up with the idea that Jesus was only ever just a spirit and that he abandoned his ghostly, phantom human body before the Crucifixion.

A century later the pendulum swung back again. Bishop Arius (who died in 336) developed the theory that Jesus was not equal to God the Father but was created by him before time began. Jesus was therefore 'the perfect creature', the being on whom divinity was bestowed by God. Arians said that Jesus could never fully 'know God' because he is less than God. They quoted St John 14: 28 where Jesus says, *for the Father is greater than I.*

Arianism became hugely influential in the 4th century. In Arius' model, God the Father is all knowing and all powerful. Jesus was less important because he had been made by God the Father although he was still perfect and had been given a human body so that in the incarnation he could show us as much of God as we could cope with. The Holy Spirit was then a bit lower still: as Jesus' advocate or spokesperson he was the one called to channel the power of Jesus into the hearts of those who believe.

Which is pretty similar to what the Jehovah's Witnesses teach today (although they don't really rate the Holy Spirit at all). And they have re-written the opening lines of St John's Gospel to make it all fit: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was A God.* In their version Jesus is a creature sometimes identified with the Archangel Michael, who only became the Messiah after his Baptism. JWs are really latter-day Arians – with a few modern (bad and mad) theories about blood transfusions which are all their own.

But back to the Early Church: once the Roman Emperor Constantine had been converted to Christianity in 312, he was keen to reconcile all the rival theories of the Monarchists, the Docetists, and the Arians once and for all. Rival bishops disputing who Jesus was stopped the Empire being strong. So Constantine ordered all the bishops to meet him at a place called Nicea in the year 325ad.

And there the Catholic bishops, led by St Athanasius, managed to concentrate minds – not on St John 14: 28 (*the Father is greater than I*) but on the Trinitarian St John 10: 30 (*I and the Father are one*) which finally got written up as the Creed we are so familiar with today. But **HOW are they one? How can individual identities, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be one **AND** yet be identified separately?**

The only way of answering that was to bandy about a series of complicated Greek technical terms – words that, in translation, we have become familiar with whenever we say the Nicene Creed on Sundays in Church: *God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father through whom all things were made...* The original Greek words are ‘Homoousios’ (they came from the same substance) and ‘hypostasis’ (yet they have a defined individuality): and it is these technical words which the great theologians have, since Nicea, used to ‘define’ the Three-fold nature of God – ‘filling in’ where the New Testament only gives a few clues.

But hang on: these technical words might help the bishops and the scholars - but are they of any use to you and to me?! St Augustine wrote 15 books on the Holy Trinity. It took him 20 years between 399 and 419ad; and he still ended his last book with a prayer which asked for forgiveness if he hadn’t got it all quite right!

So when we reply to Jesus’ question with which we started this service, *Who do people say that I am?* we too can say with St Peter, *You are the Son of God*. But in a way we know that is just a convenient phrase for a paradox and a mystery that has challenged Christian believers since the very first words of the New Testament were being written.

So can I end with a few thoughts – and a favourite Bible passage - which have helped me over the years?

Whatever the set words of the Creed, they are just pointers to something so very much greater. I actually know God in a million and one different ways! I experience him in the natural world, in my prayer life and when I read the Bible, in the love of those around me and when he takes over and achieves things that I could never have done on my own.

While, like St Augustine, I find myself having a deep, gut awareness of him as Father and Creator, as Son and teacher, and as Spirit and source of power, I also know that these things are just the tip of the iceberg. I know him as these things but, like those early scholars, as so much else too. It is just that my words fail me.

But perhaps that doesn't matter because God doesn't need our words: wherever and however, he is still knowable, always there – but only if we wait.

As one of today's readings reminds us: *Those who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.* (Isaiah 40: 31).

That is the God the Creed is pointing to.