

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 26 May 2013      Trinity Sunday (Year C)  
Prov. 8.1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Rom. 5.1-5; John 16.12-15

Is doctrine a help or a hindrance, a good thing or an embarrassment? And what exactly is its place in the Christian life? People certainly get hot and bothered about it. I have this vivid memory of the time I went on pilgrimage to Mount Athos with Charles Brock, round about 1980. Mount Athos is an autonomous part of Greece and a monastic republic, where no women may go, nor apparently any female animals. Quite how the wildlife sustains itself is a mystery. We got the required permits and spent four days hiking between monasteries, getting up before dawn for the liturgy, and eating very little. Conditions were rather primitive, but the mountainous landscapes were very beautiful. One evening, as we sat outside in the westering sun, a young Greek pilgrim engaged me in earnest debate about the double procession of the Spirit; or rather, was extremely anxious to inform me that the whole of the Western Church had got it wrong. In the Nicene Creed the West confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son; but in the East, from the Father alone. This may not keep you awake at night. It doesn't me. But it's been a dividing-point for a thousand years and evidently still rankles.

Arguments about doctrine can be fascinating if you're into that kind of thing, and baffling in the extreme if you're not. In our tradition we very rarely say the Creeds, though we do use the quasi-credal Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church at ordinations of elders and ministers, which, typically of the tradition, is considerably longer than the historic creeds. But it has its moments. This reluctance is partly because creeds were not designed for use in a liturgical setting, but also because what they say can be awkward for people who are encouraged to think for themselves: 'He descended into hell', for example. Many of us say them when we must with a degree of mental reservations or with our own spin on what they might mean. And of all the Christian doctrines surely the most problematic of all is the Trinity. It is a source of tension with the other monotheistic faiths, because it appears to question the oneness of God, and in its classical

formulation of a God who is one in substance and three in Persons, and because it is expressed in a philosophical language which we no longer use.

Human language is wholly inadequate to contain let alone define the idea of God, but it is all we have. The great Christian doctrines were worked out in times of great controversy to try to preserve insights into the divine nature which were being challenged. It's hard to believe that people would have rioted in the streets over different interpretations of the Trinity or the nature of Christ, but they did, and the reason is surely the same as the one which leads to any kind of sectarian violence: different groups become associated with a particular point of view and they come into conflict. We have lived through that in Northern Ireland and we are living through it in the violence between different faith communities within Islam. It hardly goes without saying that when doctrine turns into warring slogans which justify attacking the other side, it is being abused, turned into a blasphemous parody of itself. All the language we use about God is provisional and symbolic. It cannot be otherwise, because our words cannot contain or imprison God.

Does this mean, then, that there is nothing we can say? Should we give up? The theologian Paul Tillich said that God does not exist the way you or I exist, or a tree or a house exists. God is not a being among other beings. God, Tillich said, *is* Being, the Ground of all being. He meant that the language we use about God is not the same as the language of facts, of two and two making four. But one kind of language has a special place in the great Christian teachings, and it is the language of paradox. God is both Three and One. Impossible; he must be one or the other. Christ is both human and divine. Impossible; they cannot coexist. The bread and wine of Holy Communion are the body and blood of Christ yet they remain bread and wine. Impossible; they must be either/or. In language of paradox, two apparently conflicting things are both held to be true. But it's not only theology that uses it. We talk about a bittersweet experience, despite the fact that something cannot be bitter and sweet at the same time, because it's the most vivid way we have of describing it. The old poets used to bang on endlessly about the sweet wounds of love. If you take one part of the paradox away then you lose an essential element of what you're trying to say. Love isn't only sweet; it hurts, too; but it hurts in a delightful way. So when we speak of

the Triune or three-in-one God we are not talking mathematics, but trying to put into the imperfect vessel of human language an understanding of God which is impoverished if the threeness or the oneness are treated literally or exclude each other. It's the same with the divine and human Son. People with tidy minds find these formulations troublesome, so they try to resolve the paradox, and that always leads to loss. In its classical formulation, the divine Son is the second Person of the Trinity, who lets go of the majesty and power of God and assumes the form of a servant or slave, living among us as one of us. What is lost if Jesus of Nazareth is simply a good man through whom the spirit of God shines to an unusual degree? The divine embrace of our human pain and brokenness; the divine willingness to be the victim of our human hatred; the divine battle with human death. In other words, God remains an onlooker from the touchline, not a participant in the ebb and flow of the match. The creeds make this clear by insisting that the only Son begotten of the Father is the same as he who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; not a substitute, not a play-actor, but the divine Son in human nature. For Trinitarian Christians, it has always been important to maintain these links, not break them.

But people didn't first dream up the doctrine and then justify it. That's the wrong way round. Doctrines emerged out of debate, argument and conflict, and those which are stated in the creeds evolved through of a long and often bitterly contested process. They use the language of their time. But, like all human formulations, whether in words or in pictures, they cannot contain God or be a substitute for God. There's something about us that always seems to want the words to mean exactly what they say. We do it with the Bible and we can do it with doctrines. Here is what it says; this is the truth; you can either take it or leave it. And that's a dangerous mistake to make. God is other than, above, beyond any human attempts to capture him; yet he has given us a living picture of himself in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Scriptures. Jesus, to use a different metaphor, is God translated into terms we can understand, see, touch.

There is a strand of theology, more prevalent in the Christian East than in the West, which asserts that we can only say what God is not, and never what God is. When we speak of God as love we are in danger of defining love as we understand it, which is

in limited and imperfect ways. When we speak of God as just or as merciful, we cannot but limit him to our own conceptions of justice and mercy, and goodness knows they are narrow enough. This negative theology is a good corrective to some of the more strident claims we sometimes hear made in the name of Christianity. ‘The Bible says...’; ‘The Church teaches....’; and so on, as if they were set in stone. For God has redefined the nature of love, or rather the love which is God’s has come to dwell in our midst so that we should be drawn to embrace this new vision of what it means. The justice and the mercy of God are not simply better versions of ideas familiar to us. They are the living source of whatever small and imperfect acts of justice or mercy human beings may do. This theological tradition is one which encourages humility rather than assertiveness and a proper reluctance to make claims which no human being should make in order to demean, let alone persecute, another. My old friend Martin Camroux, recently retired from the URC ministry, had this to say in a recent sermon:

The Bible teaches a humble modesty in the face of the mystery that is God. The Bible understands the danger inherent in the human need to define God precisely, to pin God down. The Bible knows how close that comes to formulating God in our image and using God for our purposes.

Which of course is where religion gets uneasy. I remember once giving a talk on ‘The Christian hope’. Afterwards someone came up to me his eyes blazing. ‘I don’t hope’, he said, ‘I know’. How much more satisfactory that seems. And how dangerous it is. Jack Spong [the radical American theologian] puts it like this:

‘Religion is primarily a search for security and not a search for truth. Religion is what we so often use to bank the fires of our anxiety. That is why religion tends toward becoming excessive, neurotic, controlling and even evil. That is why a religious government is always a cruel government.’

On the face of it, the doctrine of the Trinity seems to be at the opposite extreme, boxing God in to a set of formulae that Christians are required to believe. But it isn’t. It’s an open door, not a closed system. It’s language trying to say what cannot be said. It’s a human response, a prayerful and an inspired one, to the ways in which the

experience of Christ has changed the ways in which people think about God. Like all doctrine, it is the servant, not the master; a guide, not a tyrant ; not a destination, but a journey; not an imposition, but a invitation to explore what is meant when we proclaim that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And don't we see the need for that reconciliation wherever we look?