

2015–05-31 Clive Mansell

TRINITY SUNDAY Gospel Reading: John 3, vv1 – 17

It is very good to be with you all this morning and I am delighted to be here on the occasion of your Patronal Festival day, your Feast of Title. Thank you to Sue, your Vicar, for the invitation and welcome.

Many parishes are named after distinguished Christian people from across the centuries. Those who bear the title of “Saint” — St James, St Peter, St Paul, even St Mary, but you at Crockham Hill have gone right to the top, haven’t you! You are named after *the Holy Trinity, God himself!*

Perhaps I should respond by commenting that we, therefore, expect great things of you here at Crockham Hill!

Earlier this month, I went to an occasion where we were invited to pray for various activities and mission across the world. One of the people who was there came from the Bible Society and she gave those of us present *a page of text*. (– You had a copy of that page of text given to you on entering the church here this morning.)

It was in a script which we could not understand. It turned out that the language was “*Khmer*” — one of the languages spoken in Cambodia. Without being able to read the text, or to understand the language, what we had before us was something of a mystery. It turned out, on further enquiry later, that the passage which we had before us, set down in the Khmer language was, was from John’s Gospel, Chapter 3 — from which our Gospel Reading this morning was taken.

Ah — now the mystery began to be solved. Thanks to the work of Bible translators, who brought the Scriptures to us in our language, English, we could understand the passage. It would have remained a mystery if we had only known it in the Khmer language, whether written or spoken, or, indeed, in its original Biblical Greek.

For many people — even those with the long tradition of a Christian belief — the idea of God as Trinity — *the Holy and Undivided Trinity* indeed — can be as mysterious as the text of St John’s Gospel in the Khmer language is to most English people.

To those of the wider community round about us with no particular contact with the Christian story or the Biblical writings, the notion of God — let alone God as the Holy and Undivided Trinity — can be as mysterious — if not indeed more mysterious — than that text in the Khmer language.

Just as something of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been revealed to us and to our forebears across the ages, so, too, *there is some element of responsibility on us to unpack and unfold the Christian faith to those of our own generation*. We may not begin with the doctrine of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, but we will pretty quickly encounter aspects of the reality of the Christian faith which draw upon our understanding and experience of God as Trinity.

Of course, the Biblical record is not one which says that God suddenly declares himself to be “Holy Trinity” (— incidentally, it is not an expression found within Scripture itself), but he reveals himself to us and to others as one who is *real and personal and ever-present and everlasting and before us and beside us and beyond us and, of course, one who above all has come close to us, both in the*

figure of Jesus Christ of Nazareth — God become man as we proclaim him at Christmas-time especially — and in the inner and invisible presence and power of the Holy Spirit experienced in dramatic ways by the first disciples, as celebrated last Sunday at Pentecost/Whitsunday, and whom we know inwardly - in ways which we struggle to express in words from our own personal experience.

Just as a couple coming together in acquaintance and in love and in a developing relationship discover more of each other, so too, we as individuals come to meet and understand more of God as personal and to develop our relationship of mutual love with him.

Today, Trinity Sunday, we mark God as a mystery revealed and a revelation to be shared, as one who is personal and who is to be understood and known in love, and one who offers himself to us and to all.

In part, too, today, Trinity Sunday is an opportunity to express our celebration of the God whom we know and who, in some measure, we understand and can describe, - and the idea of being both Three in One and One in Three, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Holy, Undivided Trinity, is a key and important way of expressing his description.

I do encourage people not to be too put off by the concepts of One in Three and Three in One. Of course, you and I are familiar with this notion of *plural and singular in our experience of something as simple as H₂O*, which is water in its liquid form, ice in its solid form and steam in its gaseous form. That does not scare us or worry us. Why should the notion of God as Three in One and One in Three scare us or worry us?

So, too, we have *plural and singular in our identities and relationships.*

To my children, Felicity, Giles and Olivia, I am Clive the Father. To my late parents, Mervyn and June Mansell, I was Clive the Son. To my wife, Jane, here this morning, I am Clive — not the Holy Spirit — but Clive the Husband. We all exist in relationships which are multiple and yet we, ourselves, are singular and individual.

Sometimes, our predecessors were rather more confident in their celebration of God as Trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit than, perhaps, we are.

We find that in the so-called *Doxology*, which concludes our saying of the Psalms “*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.*”

We find it *in our symbols and in our architecture.*

This morning, I am wearing *a stole* which was made for me by Palestinian refugees shortly before my ordination in 1982. I commissioned them to create it for me. Near the top of the stole, on either side, it bears this symbol — which some of you can see more clearly than others. The symbol is known as the *Triquetra*. It is three interlinked wings, overlapping one with another, all equal and individual, and yet, together, they form *one* symbol.

It is an ancient symbol of God as the Trinity, Three in One and One in Three. More familiar, perhaps, is the idea of *the clover leaf or St Patrick's fabled shamrock*, - three leaves in one leaf.

When I was first in North Yorkshire, I was on the staff of Ripon Cathedral, as well looking after three country churches, and in the great East window of that Cathedral, carved in stone by medieval stonemasons, there is a wonderful celebration of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The stonework is filled with symbols of the Trinity. There you find Triquetras, set inside a great circle — the circle being a symbol of the eternal God, one with no beginning and no end. There are circles set there inside circles. As you process through the great choir screen into the Eastern part of the Cathedral, your gaze will be lifted up to the Great East window and there, in the top half of the window, *almost dancing before you, despite being set in stone*, are these symbols of God as Trinity. It is a *glorious and confident celebration of the reality of God*.

Again, *in the living out of our Christian faith before other people*, there should be a sense of *confident celebration of the God in whom we trust*, the God whom we know and the God who has been revealed to us, most especially in Jesus Christ, but also more fully as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This may all be a mystery to some people, but to you and I can come opportunities for helping others discover the God who is longing to relate to them, just as he has surrounded them with his presence and love *for all their days and before they even came into being*.

We may think that is a *challenge* in our contemporary society. Certainly, it can take time and effort, care and commitment. However, *attempting to do this may not be as hard as it could be*.

That Bible Society lady, whom I met some weeks ago and who gave me that page of St John's Gospel in the Khmer language, told us of a particular tribe of people who live in the hill areas of Eastern Cambodia and neighbouring Vietnam. They are only about 150,000 souls in total. They are the Bunong. Their language was not written, even 10 years ago. A missionary couple, who work for the Wycliffe Bible Translators, went to live with these tribal people in 2001. For the first 6 years, they learned the language, then devised an alphabet and script and just lived and loved the people (traditionally, animist in practice and belief), before beginning the translation of the New Testament in 2007. It was a joint project with the Bible Society of Cambodia, which has printed each book of the New Testament as it has been completed. By February 2013, when this lady from the Bible Society was there, just over half of the New Testament had been completed, but now they are about to celebrate the translation and publishing of the whole of the New Testament.

It was not an easy journey and there has been much local opposition. When asked what other problems the translators had faced, they said that the Bunong had no concept or word for *love* (or, indeed, *"thank you"*) in their culture. (Repeat.)

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine living in a culture which has no concept or word for *"love"* (or, indeed, *"thank you"*)?

Into that setting, those Wycliffe Bible translators *patiently and sacrificially* brought something of the Christian message, a message in which the nature of *love* is *hugely present and deeply powerful*.

Our Gospel Reading this morning, - the one also found on that page of Khmer text in your hands, at different points touched on God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit It also picked up that word *"love"*

in one of the most profound and moving verses found in the New Testament and which for so many has summed up the nature of life understood in the context of God.

John 3, v16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

"God so loved the world – God so loved you and me and those around us - that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Thank God that you and I have never lived in a culture which has no concept or word for love.

Thank God that those around us have never lived in a culture which has no concept or word for love.

Thank God that our culture, yours and mine, - sometimes without us recognising it, - has been shaped by our understanding and experience of God as Holy Trinity, whose love has been made known to us supremely in the person of Jesus Christ and whose Holy Spirit has fashioned and seeded notions of love in both individuals and societies, sometimes unnoticed by us and by those who are our neighbours.

Today, Trinity Sunday, we mark God as a mystery revealed and a revelation to be shared, as one who is personal and who is to be understood and known in love, and one who offers himself to us and to all.

Today, Trinity Sunday we have an opportunity to express our celebration of the God whom we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit both in time and eternity.

Today, Trinity Sunday, we thank God that his love has shaped us and our culture and the whole of existence and that, like those medieval architects and masons joyfully and confidently crafting their triquetras and circles in stone, we, - you and I, - can celebrate and share something more of him with those of our generation that they too may know him less in mystery and more in love themselves.