

2019-06-16 Simon Burton-Jones - Bishop of Tonbridge

One of the truisms of public life is that it's not what you know but who you know that matters. We like to think that opportunity is spread evenly across society but it is possible that the personal connections we have count more than the qualifications we hold. Although we believe in the equality of all people in a democracy, some are able to access power more effectively than others.

At a deep spiritual level, the saying is true: it's not what you know but who you know that counts. On Trinity Sunday we celebrate the nature of this bond between Father, Son and Holy Spirit but must admit we struggle to make sense of this deep spiritual resource. Our liturgical worship is lovingly defined in Trinitarian terms. Every collect, creed and blessing speaks of Father, Son and Holy Spirit but we anecdotally seem to believe in something less.

Perhaps we find it hard to understand God as three in one is because our culture encourages us to look at the world from the standpoint of the individual. This way of thinking has been reinforced by several centuries of individualism. To put it simply: I am me and you are someone else. In our world there is a gap between individuals which is approved of: a space which people cherish and defend. It is this gap which led Woody Allen mischievously to describe marriage as two psychopaths under one quilt.

The Trinity knows nothing of this private space. God is three persons who is perfectly one. Christians have struggled to embrace this because there is little in the modern world as it has developed that helps us to interpret it. There is even some cultural prejudice against the number three. We say 'two's company, three's a crowd'. We mutter darkly of eternal triangles which would be solved if only one corner would go away. We say bad things come in threes and it is an unlucky number in fairy stories: the three blind mice, the three little pigs. Two is considered a natural number: we have two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs. Three seems odd on this count.

In addition to these philosophical and cultural challenges to three being one there are religious objections too. Some adherents of other monotheistic religions have accused Christians of idolatry because of the way they talk. If we break down the Trinity crudely into three separate units we invariably place more emphasis on one than on another, leading to the charge of having three separate gods. When we pray, many of us imagine God up there and us down here and a vast expanse between us, as if the mediation of Jesus and the presence of his Spirit were not available. In such ways we pray more like Muslims than Christians.

A related difficulty we have with three persons is one of inclusion: one person often gets forgotten. People remember the first two men on the moon for instance (Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin) but rarely recall the name of the astronaut who orbited the

moon while they had all the fun (Michael Collins, if you're asking). In a similar way we lapse into thinking in Binitarian rather than Trinitarian terms: one person of the Trinity tend to be overlooked. As we generally know who the Father and the Son are, it is the Holy Spirit who gets forgotten, which is a cause for concern when you think we are talking about the Spirit of Jesus whom the New Testament says lives in the heart of every Christian. The Holy Spirit has residence within us, yet we conduct ourselves as if he is that freaky relative who lives in the attic whom no-one sees and only gets talked about in hushed whispers.

Despite these challenges to us understanding the Trinity more fruitfully, we have the resources to do so around us. Stop and think for a moment of the times when you have really connected with someone else. Your mood is just the same as theirs or you are thinking exactly the same thought at the same time that they are. For a moment it can feel like you are one and the same person, as if the distance between you has been reduced to nothing. In these moments we get the shadow of an idea of what it must be like to be in the Trinity. The real reason we feel separate from one another is because self-absorption creates an obstacle. There is no self-absorption in God – just perfect oneness. Those who have been joined in marriage will know the sense of oneness that the fulfilment of this covenant supplies.

The Trinity gives us a remarkably important perspective on our common life. We are called into relationship with one another, a community that mirrors the equality, mutuality and harmony of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Any political agenda which wants to reflect the character of God should begin with the Holy Trinity and proceed from there to a relational view of human flourishing.

In the end we cannot fully comprehend the Trinity. After all, what we fully understand in life we may be said to have mastered. God is too great for our finite minds, but the relationship we are called to with him means we are on a lifetime's journey of exploration and friendship. Getting on in life really is about who you know, not what you know.