

## Trinity Sunday 2020

### Matthew 28:16-20 Jesus Appears to His Disciples

*<sup>16</sup> The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshipped him, even though some of them doubted. <sup>18</sup> Jesus drew near and said to them, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. <sup>19</sup> Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age." (Good News Translation)*

*The following is a transcript of an informal talk by our vicar, Rev Mike Peatman*

So, there we have it. Jesus' final words to his friends, his followers, his disciples are to go and baptize, not in the name of God, but in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus and his friends would have been very passionately committed to believing in one God. They were all Jews and they all believe, therefore, in one God and that is a strictly held belief to this day. So they're believing in one God, and yet this God is named with these three names in the formula for baptism.

For centuries Christians have wrestled with this idea that God reveals himself in a three-fold away. And yet he's one God. Christians have always been adamant that they don't believe in three gods. They believe in one, but that one God is manifested in what became referred to as 'persons': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And Christians have come up with all sorts of pictures to try and resolve that.

Some people talk about liquid water, ice and steam are being H<sub>2</sub>O. They're all made of the same 'stuff'. But then you start to think, well, that means that God is made of 'stuff', so where does this 'stuff' come from and who made that? So that doesn't quite work, even though it can help a little bit to people.

Maybe you've heard talks about leaves with three parts. I once heard another one about the Island of Trinidad that if you sail towards it from one angle, apparently you see three peaks, but it's one island [no idea if this is true!]. And we have these images that people hold on to of triangles and so on. Other people try and solve it like a mathematical equation. Of course, one plus one plus one equals three if God is a quantity of stuff, if Jesus is a quantity and the Holy Spirit is, but it's the wrong way of thinking about God. God isn't a quantity of a substance that can be carved up in that way. And rather confusingly in the older prayer books, it actually talks about persons of the Trinity being 'of one substance' as it's trying to spell out the meaning of the Trinity in the declaration of our belief that we refer to as The Creed.

It all becomes a bit of a headache, and probably that's because we're coming at it from the wrong angle. One way of dealing with it is just to go, well, it's all a mystery, but that leaves you a bit stranded, doesn't it? In fact, as Christians worshipped and lived and experienced the life of God within their community, and indeed having met Jesus themselves, they began to understand that there were different experiences of God. And the only way of fully understanding that range of experiences was to think of God in a threefold way.

The Bible makes references to the Trinity as we've seen already - in that formula from Matthew's gospel. There are some others, but the Bible doesn't really spell out the idea of the Trinity in any one place very rigorously at all. It was all worked out in the centuries afterwards and Christians have wrestled with this, asking questions like: was the Holy spirit, truly God, and if not, what are we experiencing? And how do we know that's authentically God. If Jesus wasn't revealing God to us, then who was he and can he do anything useful for us? And God, the Father, in the sense that God is also everywhere permeating the whole universe then is he really God? Or is he just another creature like us?

So, they had all these mad debates, but what they came to understand was their experience of God was best described and summed up in what we eventually refer to as the doctrine of the Trinity and actually what's spelled out in the creeds.

I think right at the heart of the Christian understanding of God is relationship and community. That, although we believe God is one, somehow within himself, there is this relatedness and this community of life going on - even within his own being. Although all manifestations of the Trinity - Father, Son, the Holy Spirit - are perfectly authentically and truly God, then there's still somehow some sense of relationship.

That means that relating and relationships, if we're made in his image, are fundamental to us as human beings, and it explains why community is so important. That's why it's quite frustrating we can't actually physically meet as community at the moment. And that's why these videos, we hope, are still giving people touching places to feel part of a community. God built us for relationships. God built us for community because he made us in his image and He's community.

And I think that is what's at the core of the doctrine of the Trinity. And that means that the breadth of the way in which God is discovered and encountered means that God is both what we would call transcendent - beyond all this - but he's also right here in our hearts and knowable in the person of Jesus Christ.

God is all of those things simultaneously. There's a sense in which you can't be all of those things unless the Trinity helps us to understand why He can be all of those things at once. It's a complicated idea, but the most important thing to take away is it's about relationship. God's very being enables him to be in relationship, not simply as a distant God, although he is that as well, but also a God who is close at hand.

Think of that verse in John's gospel when he's talking about Jesus coming into the world: "the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:14). Literally it means pitched his tent. If you've ever been camping with somebody you'll know that in the next tent, you can hear everything. It's pretty close and intimate living conditions. God comes close to us, even though he is not confined by that, even though he's also infinite.

And that to me is what the Trinity upholds and helps us to understand and to believe.

The idea of the Trinity might look a very sort of arid academic idea, perhaps a bit of a mind bender, and a bit of a riddle. In fact, deep down, it's about relationship. It's about a God, who you and I can know.