

Sermon Notes for Trinity I

I propose to start from a petty crime in my neighbourhood. Somebody who imagines himself a Christian and a “street artist” disfigured two builders' hoardings with an ugly “Jesus saves” and added a reference (Mark 8.36). Now this is a crime and a sin, for any Christian should treat other people's property with respect, and at least one of the builders has been put to the expense of painting over the message. I know of no evidence that proclaiming the gospel (even if that is achieved in this case) can rightly be done by setting at nought basic moral obligations. Secondly, I follow the teaching of the Oxford Movement – we should not blurt out the deepest truths of the faith on all occasions. It dishonours God and tends to trivialise the faith even if it converts. Thirdly, this is ineffective proclamation. The imagined audience do not know what “saves” means (and would not be much wiser if they knew what the reference meant and how to look it up). A generation ago this assertion would have led to humour about interest rates! We cannot offer a saviour until hearers have realised they have a condition from which to be rescued. (They do not sin who pay for biblical texts to be plastered on the side of buses – but the other cautions still apply.) But most important – to what extent is this bad theology? For our business is with good theology and the recent feasts.

Most bad theology is not without some truth. Jesus does save. But be careful. Some would also say that the Blessed Virgin saves (because her initial consent was essential to the scheme of our salvation). More carefully, we say that the Holy Trinity saves, because there is one “economy”, one plan of God in that salvation. It is a horrible error to drift into thinking that Jesus saves us from the Father! The promise in John is that all three persons of the Trinity will dwell in us. Now this is not to abolish distinctions of working. Only the Word of God “became flesh and dwelt among us” and He administers the Spirit to believers. But there is unity of will. So the Church gives glory to the Father through the Son and knows it can only do so because it is in the effective realm of the working of the Spirit. That is how we are caught up into the Trinity, and that is what we are doing throughout the eucharist (if most obviously in the doxology at the end of the eucharistic prayer). It is because the work of Christ on earth has been ratified in heaven (Ascension) that Christ is able to impart the Spirit to us (Whitsun) so that we can render our worship (Trinity).

So we can hardly avoid a doctrine of the Trinity. I do not say that everybody (or anybody) has to be able to understand and justify the Athanasian Creed. Even so, it may be thought that there is a risk of converting the “simple faith” into a philosophical system (and indeed honest Christians in the fourth century did object to the use of unbiblical terms). There are two answers to this. Firstly, the New Testament is not simple – and indeed very difficult because the writers are struggling to express unique events in a varied and changing mixture of Jewish and Greek terms. Secondly, there is no escaping risk. Whatever one tries to adopt as the essence of the faith carries risk. Is it allegiance? Yes, but this may be emotional, lacking practical content. Is it a moral commitment? Yes, but that comes with the risk of a negative morality and a minimum religion (ask the Deists). Is it at its best in mystical prayer? There may be a sense in which that is true, but we do not all have the gift. Is it focused in worship? Yes, as the trashy nature of much modern worship shows by inversion. But even at the best, worship is only a brief focus; it has to be extended into the rest of our lives. God never demanded less than everything; any attempt to simplify this will always be wrong. But in that everything the intellectual component of faith is part. As it fades, we get Deism, or Islam, or the various “new age” movements from the papacy downwards which claim a gift of the Spirit to escape discipline.

So in the Church of England as it once was we recited the Athanasian Creed on all these three great feasts. Not as if any or all of us had a precise understanding of its meaning, but because intellectual underpinning is essential to the faith. You can have the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation and their consequence, the Church as the place of the Spirit and place where however imperfect a response to God is made – or you will have “messy church” for a while, and then just mess.

We are taught to “believe in God the Father, who hath made me and all the world; in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind; and in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God.” (Catechism) We do well – but please note that this is not an explanation of the Trinity, merely an appreciation of the “economy” of God's good purpose towards us. May we learn to respond to it better.