**Sermon: Let the Spirit be your guide**

Readings:

John 16:12-15 (NIVUK)

Galatians 5:19-26 (MSG)

So, we’ve just affirmed the topic of today’s sermon – The Doctrine of the Trinity! We’ve all described it in the Creed as indeed we do most weeks. I’m assuming therefore that we all have a pretty good understanding about what it means! Perhaps a bit like an egg? Or a shamrock? Or H2O? There are plenty of reasonably neat formulas, but none of them present a completely satisfactory picture and all of them leave questions unanswered.

The Trinity is indeed famously difficult to fathom and as we see in our thoughts for the week, even some of the greatest preachers were not confident of ever being able to understand it in any real depth: “*Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God*." (John Wesley). As limited, temporal beings, we will always struggle to understand the eternal maker of Heaven and Earth!

But that isn’t the only reason why we might struggle to understand the full nature of God. Perhaps the greatest problem for Christian teachers is that we don’t have any clear Biblical instruction. There is no direct reference to the Trinity in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. There are many references to God the Father and there are one or two references affirming that Jesus is God – Thomas’ assertion “My Lord and my God” and the prologue to John’s Gospel. And there are several verses that could be interpreted to show affinity between the Father and the Spirit, or Jesus and the Spirit, but nowhere is there a reference to the Father, Son & Holy Spirit being three consubstantial persons in one essence!

The closest we get is perhaps the words for the Grace that we find in 2 Corinthians 13: 13 – “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you*”. Here, all three persons are named, but the degree to which they are divine and precisely how they relate certainly is not. God as “three in one” may well be inferred in scripture, but it certainly isn’t clear.

However, despite these limitations, many Christian theologians have spent the best part of 2000 years attempting to form deep and complex models detailing just how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit might be understood as discreet persons and of one being. The various theories gradually began to form in the first few hundred years after the apostles began to spread the good news of Christ, but unsurprisingly, given the difficulties involved, there were many disagreements and rival theories abounded.

Uniformity was only reached when the State (i.e. the Roman Empire) intervened in the 4th century, demanding a clear statement of belief from the Church. Indeed, legend has it that the Roman Emperor, Constantine, parked his troops outside the Council of Nicea and refused to let anyone out until an agreement on the Trinity and other matters of doctrine was reached! Various changes and challenges have been made to the Doctrine of the Trinity in the intervening years, but what most of us refer to today, is an orthodoxy that certainly has a degree of political influence behind it.

So, does this matter? Does it matter that we cannot speak in definite terms about the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Does it matter that the ultimate nature of God will always be shrouded in mystery? Does it matter that as Christians, we will always struggle to present our knowledge of God to the standard that the world demands?

Well, we can only really answer for ourselves, but, personally, I am not concerned that my understanding of God is limited and open to challenges. Because my faith in God, as I’m sure is the case for most of us, is not based on what I know or don’t know about God, but rather on how my faith in God and my relationship with God makes me feel.

And both of our readings this morning speak of how our faith is one of encounter and feeling – of being led by God into places of truth, where we meet with our essential, God-given nature and where we feel replenished and restored. The Gospel reading, taken from the “farewell discourse” in John, speaks of the Spirit of God, that will follow on from Jesus and continue to make Jesus available to the disciples and all generations to come. The Spirit will enable fresh encounters with Christ into the future and is an assurance both for the disciples then and for us now that God will never leave us alone.

God the Father created all things and revealed His purpose to Prophets and Patriarchs. God the Son walked among us, featuring in our history and showing us what God looks like. And God the Holy Spirit moves among us now and into our future, revealing the ways of Jesus for all and, in turn, showing us the Father.

God never leaves us alone. We cannot say without doubt just how Father, Son and Holy Spirit are connected, but we can experience something of their relationship when we open our eyes to the wonder of creation, fix our attention on the example of Jesus and allow the Spirit to direct us in our everyday lives. When the Spirit is our guide, it keeps bringing us to Jesus, and as Jesus made clear many times, in Him, we locate the Father – verse 15, “*All that belongs to the Father is mine*”.

The role of the Spirit in bringing us to Jesus, to God, to wholeness, is further expanded in our first reading from Galatians. The Message translation forcefully contrasts the outcomes of lives lived without and within the Spirit.

Those who ignore God and seek to satisfy self, become hollowed out creatures, forever frustrated and failing to fulfil what God has made them to be. Those, however, who “live God’s way”, reap the fruits of the Spirit, more commonly translated as “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,gentleness and self-control”. To live in the Spirit is to live as Christ, is to live as God.

This is the state of being that we should all be aiming for – union with the Spirit that enables relationship with Father and Son. We will never understand it and we will often be distracted away from it, as the Galatians were many times, but when we live it, when we allow God in His entirety to occupy our lives, we realise that there is nothing more in this life that has greater worth.

Let us pray…