

**Sermon on Matthew 28: 16-20 & 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13**  
**The Helpfulness of Unhelpful Preaching**

**So, here we are, Trinity Sunday, the one day in the church's calendar equally dreaded by congregation and preacher alike.**

Well done for, well, simply being here.

Your faith is clearly made of very stern stuff.

It puts me in mind of an old Robert Louis Stevenson quote – he wrote in his diary once: 'I went to church today and was not greatly depressed.'

Well, if you go away today and are not greatly depressed, I'll count that as a success.

I have in the past often managed to arrange guest preachers on Trinity Sunday, but it seems this year the lot has finally fallen to me.

Once more into the breach as they say.

**Trinity Sunday might be difficult for a few reasons, but it's the sermon today that surely creates the greatest potential for theological and spiritual bemusement (for both preacher and hearer).**

If you end up feeling like this I can only offer my humblest apologies.

However, I will console myself in the knowledge that as preachers on Trinity Sunday go, I was not the first and certainly won't be the last.

Christianity has its own peculiar speech called theology and at the heart of that is the Christian doctrine of God as Triune.

One God, in three persons – Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Three in one, one in three.

This is how we speak of the God revealed in Old Testament and New, and how we understand looking back what the biblical writers were pointing to when they spoke of God, Father, Jesus, Spirit.

But as all human language is inadequate to speak of God – there's nothing we can say that can represent or contain all of who God is – speaking faithfully and precisely of God is a great challenge.

We see as but through a glass dimly as St Paul says, then we shall see face to face.

It's always safer on Trinity Sunday to say less rather than more.

To remember the limits of the words we have to use and not to improvise too outlandishly.

I read a thing online this week where a theology student noted that he was greatly looking forward to his lecture on the Trinity.

When he got there the lecturer said – God, Father, Son, Spirit. One God, three persons. Any questions?

**What tends to happen on Trinity Sunday is that preachers look to employ a range of well worn methods which are supposed to help make a difficult task more simple.**

That is, to speak of the immortal, ineffable, mystery that is the God of the entire universe, the God revealed in Jesus Christ and mediated through the HS.

But this is generally a fruitless task.

We end up giving off the wrong impressions on any number of levels.

So today we're going to flip this around somewhat.

We're going to allow the drawbacks of 3 (of course) of the usual Trinity Sunday techniques help us delve more deeply into the heart of our loving God.

We're going to seek out the helpfulness of unhelpful preaching.

**We begin with the 'explanation' technique.**

Preachers make the mistake of thinking the Trinity is explainable.

This is difficult we argue, so we better get some flow charts and diagrams happening.

Perhaps the best known approach in this mold is the use of analogy.

In our ill fated attempt to explain the Triune God, we resort to analogies to help us.

Analogies *can help*, of course, they provide visual images which perhaps give us some insight in a simple way.

Many of these are familiar to us – the egg (shell, yolk, white), or H<sub>2</sub>O (water, ice, steam), the three legged stool, the three leafed clover, you've probably got your own favourites.

I heard a preacher struggling for ideas once describe three cockatoos he saw in a tree as some kind of trinitarian sign.

The trouble is by correlating such images with the Triune God we're reducing the great transcendent mystery of God, the God who is far beyond our human inclination and understanding to a rhetorical bumper sticker.

**Step back a few paces and this is the overriding problem with the 'explanation technique' as a whole.**

There's an assumption that we can capture the God who bursts open the normal happenings of the world in Jesus Christ in our frail human speech.

Or even worse that with our explanations God will be more knowable, like God needs an interpreter, and we're here to help.

Phew, God must be thinking!

Our posture before God must always be one of wonder and faith at what God is doing, what God is revealing, how God is drawing God's world to himself in Christ, through the Spirit.

We are blessed to participate in this great gift, this great movement of salvation, but it comes to us as a gift, from the loving God we can't ever explain.

All we can do is to receive God's gracious gift thankfully and in faith and hope.

Now none of this is to say theology, learning, deepening our faith by thinking about it is not important.

Of course it is, and there is much to learn in exploring how the church has come to speak of God as Triune.

But we'll never explain God.

Even the words the Christian tradition has employed capture only a sliver of who God actually is in his being and action.

## **The second is the practical application technique.**

The slightly less adventurous preacher leaves explanations to one side, but goes instead for practical applications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The most well worn of these focus on relationship, community, even social action.

In theology this is called the 'social trinity; movement.

It worries less about the internal relations of God, God's being and essence if you like, and concentrates more on the fact of God's triune partnership.

If God is in three persons, there's a model of community in love for us to emulate or follow.

Now again, we would want to say that there is some value in this.

Seeing God as what Rowan Williams calls a 'pattern of loving relationships', and imagining again a correlation into our lives and world of how we are to be, can be a helpful move.

If we see the Trinitarian relations of F, S, HS, as an eternal community of divine love, we might help ourselves on some level imagine what the church ought to be like:

a community of love and loving constantly flowing back and forward to create the whole body.

It might encourage us to be a little more forgiving or kind or gracious, and again, this is certainly a good thing in our world of accusation, sound bite, click bait.

**The trouble with the practical application technique is that it tends to treat God as in the first place an instrument; a human tool.**

Or at least there for instrumental purposes.

As if God exists primarily to help us get along with each other a little better, or to provide justification for a particular social agenda in the church or beyond.

While we're right, I think, to see in God the example par excellence of relationality, God's existence is perfectly contained in itself with its own inner integrity, elegance, and grace.

God is not 'for' something in that sense.

God is not a diagram (triangular or otherwise) which gives us a neat blueprint for human or ecclesial self improvement.

What's incredible, as we see in the Gospels, is that God commissions a people to make disciples and baptise in the name of F, S, and HS.

This is not a practical application of the doctrine of the Trinity, but a command of the Triune God who is always beyond us, yet loves us still and the whole world enough to send Jesus to live and die for us.

It is in following him that we learn what practical consequences flow from our call to faith.

**The last 'approach' that is sometimes deployed on Trinity Sunday is what we might call the 'minimisation technique'.**

It's all such a mystery that we're better off just not to go there, or only to say very minimal things which we know can't be wrong.

Leave it to the theologians in their ivory towers to debate the deeper intricacies.

This technique has the advantage of ensuring that it doesn't make the mistakes of the first two techniques, it acknowledges the difficulty of speaking of the Triune God and the care with which we should say anything about God at all.

The trouble is, it also leaves us somewhat empty handed.

There's a strand in theology which follows this kind of route.

It basically says that God is so mysterious and beyond us that the only way we can say things we know to be true of God is to say what God is not.

For example the Triune God is not cruel or manipulative or capricious.

The trouble with this is that the NT *does* say things about God beyond what God is not.

God is love, God is light. Jesus says, 'I am the way the truth and the life.'

So by minimising what we say about God almost to a level of not saying anything at all, or only speaking of God in the negative, 'God is not...', the danger is we barely proclaim God at all.

The ancient theologians knew they had to say something about God because the Bible did, and Jesus had set forth the call to bear witness.

And when the Bible spoke about F, S, HS, as the two passages we've heard today do, it was straining to proclaim who God is with as much precision as possible.

In a sense, the creeds are the church's way of saying the most that can be said of God.

The creeds provide the limits of what can be put into language about God's being and essence.

I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ God's only Son our Lord.

I believe in the Holy Spirit.

We can't avoid speaking of God, that is the task of proclamation, of evangelism, or witness, and of making disciples as Jesus commanded.

It's just a trick business we need to take care with.

**So, as it turns out, the oft employed techniques of preaching on Trinity Sunday, though potentially unhelpful, have proven helpful.**

And if you have not been greatly depressed here, then that's a success in my book.

But here's the most important thing:

However feebly we speak about God, however fumbling our attempts are to communicate God to others, however broken our lives in following Jesus, God continues to love us.

If I've completely confused you and you hear nothing else today, hear that.

God goes on speaking to us in the Bible, in worship, in community, of the love sent down in Jesus for us all.

There's an old story of John the evangelist, assumed writer of Revelation and the Gospel.

He was sitting with one of his disciples and the disciple said to him, 'Master, why do you speak so much about love all the time?'

John sat and sat and sat, not saying a word.

In the end after a seemingly interminable time had elapsed he answered his own question... 'I guess that's all there is.'. That's all there is.

We must speak of God, but more important is the truth in the first place that God loves us with the divine love of the ages.

That that's all there is.

And if that's the extent of what we know about God, vast and unfathomable as it is, in some sense that will be enough.

So, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the HS, be with you now and always. Amen.