

Sermon: St. James Cambridge
Trinity Sunday 31 May 2015

Isaiah 6.1-8
Romans 8.12-17
John 3.1-17

Preaching on the Holy Trinity has to be prefaced with the warning that it is not only difficult, but impossible to do – and what I am talking about today will only reflect on aspect of God, Holy Trinity, mystery, beyond our understanding, and yet closer to us than we can comprehend.

I have never been keen to try and explain how the Trinity works; how God can be one, yet three persons, but one aspect of the Trinity which is making increasing sense to me, is that the God, revealed to us by Jesus Christ, is a God of love who has ‘relationship’ in the heart of God’s being, in other words, you could say that God is ‘community’.

So, I was pleased to come across Leonardo Boff’s words (Brazilian Liberation Theologian): ‘Why get concerned today with the Blessed trinity?’ His answer is:

‘We never simply live, we always live together. Whatever favours shared life is good and worthwhile. Hence it is worthwhile believing in this shared community style of God’s existence, of God’s Trinitarian manner that is always communion and union of three.’¹

I am fascinated by the fact that this understanding of God is central to some of the new expressions of Church springing up across the country. People, spiritual seekers, who are new to Christianity, or may have been on the edge of the church, are encountering the Christian faith and making sense of it by discovering that their longing for meaningful relationship and God is met by an understanding of God as ‘communion’.

Some years ago, after my sabbatical, I preached a sermon about new monastic communities, the name for some of these new forms of church, attracting people mostly in their twenties to forties, of all walks of life, who are looking for engagement with faith and God, who don’t want to turn to the traditional churches, but are willing to meet for discussion, worship, meals, meditation and bible study in various places. They continue to live separately in their various homes, and what makes them ‘monastic’ is a commitment to community and to a rule of life.

For these new monastic communities the ‘desire to engage with a God who is by nature community is key’. For many of the members a real yearning for community motivates them to get involved as they

¹ Leonardo Boff, 2000, Holy Trinity, Perfect community, Maryknoll, NY:Orbis books,p.3 , quoted in Mobsby, I & Berry, M., A new monastic Handbook, Canterbury Press,2014, p.36

experience our culture as 'consumerist and individualistic.'² And they acknowledge that community is not easy – it requires commitment, hard work, and at times pain. Yet, the yearning is strong, and having an understanding of God as Trinity, a recognition that at the heart of all existence is relationship and connectedness, makes it worthwhile. Although community living is never easy, it helps to know that it's part of who we are, made in the image of God.

For these new monastic communities, equality and participation are very important features of community life, and whilst they have leaders, who usually have some theological and liturgical training, enabling all in the community to contribute and develop their gifts, this is of utmost importance. Again, teaching on the Trinity supports their communal life. Theologians use the greek term *perichoresis* to describe this aspect of the nature of God; *perichoresis* meaning co-participation, mutual indwelling and self-surrender – one is invariably in the other two as they are in the one. There is no hierarchy in the Trinity, ie. God, the Father is not above the Son and the Spirit; the Trinity is a mutual community.

In these new monastic communities everyone is encouraged to use their gifts, and as they do so, for the sake of the community, there will be a mutual enrichment of individuals and the community as a whole and their mission. These Christian communities are not centred on themselves, but have a definite understanding that their calling is to serve God's mission: as the Father sent his Son, the Son, after his resurrection, sent his followers to bear witness to the Son, assisted by the Spirit who calls them to be community, to be the Church.

There is a large new monastic community in the City of London, called Moot, based at St.Mary Aldermary. Many of them are people who discovered the depth and richness of the Christian faith through the engagement of journeying together as a community on the edge of the Church. They have a strong sense of their mission as reaching out to those who have a deep spiritual hunger for meaning and belonging but would not turn to mainstream Churches to satisfy this.

All of this, is of course, very much rooted in Scripture.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the feast Pentecost, hearing again the story from Acts in which the Holy Spirit descends on the first apostles and immediately connects them with people of all nations and creates community.

Our New Testament readings this morning from Pauls' letter to the Romans and John's gospel both speak of the role of the Spirit in the creation of communion, with God and with one another. Paul wrote: 'all who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery and fear,

² A new monastic Handbook, p.36

but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba, Father! It is the very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God....and heirs with Christ.' Just as Jesus called God Father, we too, call God Father, and just as Jesus was one with his Father, in other words in communion with the Father, so we are invited to be one with the Father, in communion with the Father, and therefore with the Holy Trinity.

In John's gospel, we had Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, come to Jesus, I think, to find out, who this Jesus really is. And the answer he gets is 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above; which, Nicodemus discovers, means being born from water and the Spirit. It means, being baptised, and thereby accepting Jesus as the Son of God, and the gift of the Spirit in one's everyday life. In some Christian circles we find the language of 'needing to be re-born', which expresses a real sense that with baptism there is a new start in life; a letting go of old hurts, habits; an openness to God's presence, new ways of seeing things and being transformed. And it means, being in communion with others and allowing them to contribute to that healing and transformation. From the earliest days Christian community has been seen as the seedbed of Christian mission, growth and transformation through the Holy Spirit. As the Church grew and developed the way community was lived, changed, but across the centuries, there have always been intentional communities, both religious and lay.

It looks like the Holy Spirit is at work in our time, enabling these new monastic communities to reach people who won't come near the traditional churches.

As a Parish Church we have much in common with these 'new monastic communities, as we are a community committed to worshipping God, sharing 'holy communion', building relationships, supporting one another, whilst also seeking to love and serve God in this parish and the various communities created through our work and leisure activities. A parish church allows for varying levels of closeness and integration in community, which is its strength.

And, we too, may find inspiration from the understanding of the nature of God as 'community', encouraging us to commit to the life of this community, to deepening our relationships with one another and with God, who is Holy Trinity, offering us communion and eternal life.

Amen.