

Trinity Sunday. May 22nd

A friend of mine served his curacy at a prestigious church in the north of England, one Trinity Sunday an eminent theologian was invited to preach the sermon. He ascended into the pulpit, said, *In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*, and descended from the pulpit. That was his sermon. Maybe he had the saying of Wittgenstein in mind, *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*. This being the fourth Trinity Sunday on which the lot has fallen on me to preach here at St James I am tempted to follow his example. The last time I preached on this day someone who is now a diocesan bishop was in the congregation and when I expressed an anxiety that I had preached heresy his response was that no-one can preach for more than ten minutes on the Trinity and not commit heresy. Which is a consolation.

I wonder what your reaction would be if indeed I began by saying that I was not going to say anything this morning because the subject was too difficult for you? If so, some of you might be thankful for the absence of a sermon, but most of you I suspect would be saying to yourselves, *Who does he think he is?*

Now this question is really what today is all about. *Who is this man? What does he say of himself? What are we to make of him? Who does he think he is?* The questions refer to Jesus, of course, not me. They are questions that challenged the Church for some 400 years and the answer the Church came up with is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Perhaps *mystery* is the most appropriate word to describe how most of us react to this doctrine. Churchill once described Russia as *a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*, and that is not entirely inappropriate to express what many Christians feel about this doctrine.

Is this then something devised by clever theologians in order to baffle us simple creatures? I don't think so. Rather it is an inference from the life and worship of the early Church and is fundamentally concerned with the question, *Who is Jesus the Christ? Who does the Church think he is?* Questions an enquirer might well have put to an early disciple, *Who is this strange, compelling man who left behind nothing but memories and yet has changed the world and stamped himself on history as no other has done?*

If, for example, you had asked Mary, his mother, who Jesus was her reply might have been something like this: *He is my son. As a baby he was like any other baby, utterly dependent on me. He grew up like any other child, full of questions, full of curiosity, sometimes mischievous, very demanding as all bright children are, and strong-willed, determined at times to go his own way, you may have read how we lost him and eventually, after a desperate search, found him in the Temple confidently discussing theology with the priests and scribes. When we protested he put us in our place good and proper. Imagine, a twelve year old boy speaking to his parents like that! It's unheard of. Yet there was always something about him that was beyond me. I adored him, I was close to him, but there was a remoteness about him that I couldn't grasp; as if he was aware of another dimension to which I was a stranger. I was his mother and yet it seemed at times that he belonged to a family that was not of this world.*

What would Peter have said if you had asked him the same question? Perhaps something like this: *I met him for the first time after a hard night's fishing. I was irritable and disappointed. We hadn't even caught a sprat. Then a young man standing on the shingle called out instructions - instructions! To me! - I nearly told him where to get off. But the tone of his voice persuaded me to take his advice. And - well, you know the rest. I arrived on the shore with my net full of fish and to my bewilderment found myself falling on my knees before him. It was his eyes. They seemed to see right through me to the very depths of my being. Is it really me, I thought, here on my knees confessing my sins? It was as though I was in the presence of God himself. From that moment on he became the centre of my life, and now the passion of my life is to share with others what I have discovered in him.*

You could also ask this question of any other of his early followers, and if you had done so you would

have evoked a similar answer. Neither would they have stopped there. They would have gone on to speak of his death, his resurrection and his departure. And here you might interrupt, *Surely when he finally left you it must have been like another crucifixion? If it was heaven to be with him, it must have been hell to be without him?*

To that question they might have replied: *The strange thing is that although we cannot see him, he doesn't seem to have left us. It is as if the Spirit that possessed him now possesses us. We call it the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, or - it is so like being with him - the Spirit of Christ. It is as if we are possessed by that which possessed him. And that Spirit enables us to make him real to others so that they too worship him and through him discover that God is their Father.*

So when I said that all Jesus left behind was memories I was telling less than the truth. He left his peace and his joy and, most of all, he left the gift of his Spirit. The presence of this Spirit was the experience of the early Church, an experience not limited to those who had known Jesus in the flesh, but shared by multitudes who have followed in their steps down the centuries even to the present day. It is this – the effect Jesus had on those he encountered when he was in the flesh and the effect he still has on those who encounter him even now - which has demanded such a doctrine as that of the Holy Trinity.

Now that may sound more than a little far-fetched, especially the claim that his Spirit still makes him real. So let me give you a present-day parallel, in this instance outside the sphere of religious experience: A journalist asked Sibyl Thorndike on her 90th birthday if she still remembered George Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*. Shaw had written the play especially for her and nearly seventy years later she remembered it word for word. *Bernard Shaw coached me in every line of it*, she said. Then without warning, her interviewer wrote, *the old lady, crippled with arthritis, came alive. Her eyes blazed, her skin as pale as white porcelain glowed again with the blush of youth and then, word perfect, she began to recite her most moving speech from the play. He said, I was astounded, She was no longer herself. The spirit of George Bernard Shaw was aglow in her and all the years dropped from her as she uttered the lines that belonged to the Irish author she revered.*

This gives us a faint glimpse into the reality of the experience the early Church was seeking to express by the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. What it essentially states is that, by the working of the Holy Spirit, the Son lives again in us and through the Son we discover the Father. It is about the presence of Christ, mediated through the Spirit, making God real to us in the here and now. And that is a subject that even four thousand sermons could never exhaust.