

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Twenty five years ago I was a convinced Unitarian. As a ten year old it was self-evident to me that God was a singular force and that there could not possibly be division within the nature of God. The source of my Unitarianism lay not in a faith tradition, but in the passionate and rational belief that if there was a God there could only be one. Twenty five years ago I did not have a doctrine of the trinity. To be honest I don't know that I would have even recognized the language of doctrine, let alone trinity. But here is the strange thing. As a ten year old I was a practicing member of the Church of England and as such was immersed in the language of a Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Church of England, as here, our service began in the name of the trinity, and I joined in saying the creed each week with its detailing of the three different persons of the Godhead, and the service concluded with a blessing in the name of the trinity. But I never made a connection between my own profound trust in the singularity of God and the linguistic contortions of the ecclesiastical picture of a triune God. Or to put it another way, as a ten year old I knew perfectly well that God was one, and the language of the church made little or no sense to me. It was abstract, it was bizarre.

Three weeks ago in North Carolina I found myself in another bizarre situation. Surrounded by twenty-six other priests from across the entire church in this country I was participating in a CREDO conference designed by the Church Pension Fund to help clergy focus on everything from health and finances to spirituality and vocation. To prepare for the week one of the tasks we had been assigned was to draw up a very brief biographical sketch or 'life line' with the key phases of our personal, social and faith development. As someone who is naturally disinclined to great bouts of backward looking navel gazing this was something I did not start on with any particular enthusiasm. But as the week progressed, I discovered just how important to the CREDO experience that particular life line exercise was.

Through the life line I was able to see just how far I have travelled and changed, as well as identify some continuities and similarities. Think for a moment if you are over twenty-five about how your own faith looked some twenty-five years ago. And if you are not yet twenty-five think about how your faith looked some five or ten years ago. It may be that for you nothing has changed in your faith, but I suspect that for many of us, like myself, there has been change.

Today as we celebrate the mystery of the holy and undivided trinity, we are asked to see the doctrine of the trinity against the backdrop of change within a whole community. For the longest time, that is to say, for the first several hundred years of the early church there was no doctrine of the trinity. You will not find a doctrine of the trinity anywhere within the pages of the scriptures. And you will not find a properly developed doctrine of the trinity before the fourth and fifth centuries.

The historical truth of the matter is that the church took the first four hundred years following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to articulate the need for a doctrine of the trinity. And let us be clear, the church realized that it needed a doctrine of the trinity long before it understood what the trinity might be. Again, it was only with the passing of time that the church discovered the importance of

holding on to a model of God in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all equally important, equally connected and equally divine.

When we celebrate the trinity today we are asked not to celebrate an abstract or bizarre mystery that none of us really understands. Rather, what we are asked to do today is celebrate the principles behind the trinity. And I don't simply mean the principals of the divinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The trinity is not solely about the qualities of the three persons who constitute the Godhead. Instead, the trinity is about the importance of understanding how the best Christian understandings of God are ones that have been forged in community and over time.

In our world of individualism and instant fixes it is no wonder that the trinity frequently makes so little sense. And so long as we think that God is someone who we can understand on our own and in the twinkling of an eye we will never really get it. I know also that for many, like my ten year old self, we may not even want to really get it. I hear you wonder what can the insights of those long dead possibly have to teach us in our contemporary situation?

But as the scriptures remind us, although they contain no doctrine of the trinity, they contain the two elements that positively demand the invention of something like it. On the one hand there is that wonderful passage from Proverbs in which we hear how Wisdom has been with God since before time, delighting in God's creations. And on the other hand we have the passage from John's gospel in which Jesus himself promises the gift of the Spirit of truth who will unveil things currently hidden from them.

Both these texts illustrate the profound biblical truth that the truth of God and the wisdom of God are far greater than anything contained within the bible. Proverbs points backwards to before the very beginning of creation, and John points us ever forwards, reminding us that even Jesus could only teach us a fraction of the truth.

Whether or not you like the doctrine of the trinity, I urge you to think about it as a lens through which to understand that from our perspective the truth of God is always fluid and ever-changing. Without the trinity a naïve biblical literalism would provide an authentic possibility of doing theology. But with the trinity we are shown that God in God's own self is continually discovering new ways of unveiling the truth and leading the human family into the truth.

Without the trinity God is something of an absent father, self-contained, monarchical, content with his lot. But with the trinity God is no longer just a patriarchal ruler, God is also the suffering and rising Son and the loving and truth-telling Spirit, a three personed God profoundly interconnected with the creation.

The Greeks have a wonderful word to help understand the relationships within the trinity. It is the word perichoresis, which literally means inter-penetrating. What perichoresis really means is that the three persons of the trinity are profoundly inter connected, but not in because they are stuck together in a stable sort of way. Rather, perichoresis understands the trinity to mean that God in God's own being is eternally moving, eternally relating, and eternally pulling all things together.

Trinity Sunday – 30 May 2010 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

Among other things my experience at CREDO taught me to be thankful for the many different relationships that have literally conspired to draw me out from myself to be more open to the Spirit of God's truth and love. This is not to say that my rational and Anglo-Saxon self would not have much preferred to have been left alone during parts of the CREDO experience. But by being open to those who were radically different, and by learning from those whose life stories were a million miles from my own I believe I learned more about the mystery of God than I could have ever have done on my own.

When all is said and done, the point of the trinity is to challenge all of us to be open to the idea that God is not just transcendent and over against us.

So give thanks for the Trinity. And remember that while none of us may ever comprehend the internal workings of the trinity, whenever we love the other and seek the truth we discover that the trinity has already found us and made us whole. Amen.