

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Trinity Sunday

readings: [Isaiah 40.12-17, 27-end](#), [2 Corinthians 13.11-end](#), [Matthew 28.16-end](#)

4 June 2023

The Church of England has become prolific in recent years in expressing its vision and strategy in terms of three-part straplines. In truth, that's far from unique to the Church of England. For example, we became very familiar with government three-part straplines during the covid pandemic.

Stay home - Protect the NHS - Save lives

Wash hands - Cover face - Make space

...to name but two.

And in the church - our own diocesan vision is summed up in the three-part strapline

Transformed lives - Growing Church - Building Community

There are many other dioceses which have very similar variations of those themes.

One other slightly different example:

Follow daily - care deeply - Speak boldly

Cruising through the websites of other dioceses, there are other examples, not just of three-part straplines, but three-word straplines. Not in this diocese as far as I am aware. Just a few:

Imagination - Faith - Engagement

Christlike - Engaged - Prayerful

Wider - Younger - Deeper

Growing - Nurturing - Serving

The Church of England centrally has its own three-word strapline too:

Simpler - Humbler - Bolder

That can be helpful in crystallising what we are about as long as we don't make it the be-all and end-all. Some may be more cynical. The Church Times cartoonist Dave Walker made me laugh out loud when he mischievously slipped into a recent cartoon a veiled reference in the three-word strapline

Pointless - Useless - Hopeless

Just saying.

Maybe, on Trinity Sunday, you can see where I am going with this.

Is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator - Redeemer - Sustainer, just a three-part strapline on the part of the early church, or is there more to it than that?

When I was an undergraduate studying theology at University—I graduated 45 years ago this year, so we are talking about a long time ago - I can remember being quite dogmatic in asserting that I found the Trinity as a doctrine quite remote. Not that I didn't believe in the different persona of God, so to speak. I experienced God as Creator and like a caring parent, I experienced God who comes close to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and offers us restoration and transformation, and I experienced God through the Holy Spirit as a life-giving energy in individual lives, in the church and in the world. But put them all together and I struggled with neat theological arguments defining the exact relationship between God in these different persona. To me, it was about as helpful as an IKEA pack laid out in bits on the floor with a set of instructions in Swedish.

Even simpler illustrations loved by many preachers about clover leaves in three parts but still one leaf, or a triangle which is one shape but with three angles, or water in the three forms of ice, liquid and steam, or the fact that I am one person who is at one and the same time a husband, father and brother left me pretty cold.

The difference between the undergraduate I was then and me now is that I sit lighter to the whole analysis thing. Because it seems to me that if we try to analyse the Trinity too much our brains quickly become scrambled in a maze of theological word games. And at the end of the day words are just that. Words. They only take us so far. Even today, I struggle with the popular idea that the Trinity expresses something of God in three persons coming together in a perfect community of love. I know a lot of people find that really helpful. But God as three persons in community with each other doesn't do it for me, I'm afraid.

On the other hand, the power of the Trinity, as I have come to understand over the years, I hope, is not so much about a doctrine thought out in the head as about a living relationship experienced in the hearts and minds of ordinary Christian worshippers as we seek to live out our faith. And often (indeed preferably) without the need for a great many words of explanation.

As the C19 Anglican Divine Thomas Hancock said,

The simplest man or woman who cannot *reason* about the trinity may *know* the trinity more perfectly than some acute theologian who has by heart all the writings of St Athanasius or St Augustine.

Perhaps, then, it's not surprising that in the Bible, the *doctrine* of the Trinity is not fully worked out. Indeed, the term 'Trinity' doesn't occur anywhere in the Bible. Certainly, in today's reading from 2 Corinthians and in the reading from the end of Matthew's Gospel all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned together, but we are apt to forget how unusual that is. No fully worked out Trinitarian doctrine in the Bible, that only came later. And yet the three persons of God in Trinity are 'implied', throughout. Mysterious, yet ever present, and undergirding everything which we would ever want to say about God - and often can't find the words to express. The fullness of God who is ultimately indescribable, but in the end inadequate words is all we've got.

Mysterious, and so, supremely great so that no person can ever really claim to know God. At the same time, God who, in the person of Jesus, showed his divinity in sharing our humanity. And who, through the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to share intimately in his life. Here is the great paradox of the Trinity. The mysterious God who is ultimately beyond our imagining, and yet who comes close to us and makes himself known to us, and who by making himself known inspires us once again to perceive his mystery and greatness; and so, to approach him in worship and in praise - and to offer our lives in his service.

So, if, in one sense, the Trinity might mean little to us, because as a doctrine it is a concept very difficult to hold on to - at the same time, it says absolutely everything about what we believe. To say, as we do in Creeds, 'I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit', and to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, is actually to say it all. The perfect three-part strapline. Everything, which it takes us the other 51 Sundays of the year to dissect and reflect on - is contained in that one affirmation of faith.

So, then, Trinity Sunday is not so much about dissecting apart as it is about drawing together into one our different experiences of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ultimately, a chance to step aside from detailed explanations about how God can be three in one and one in three and simply to contemplate our God who *is*. To worship in awe and in wonder as we experience the sheer vastness and mystery of this God who is ultimately beyond our understanding but who nevertheless makes himself known to us and dwells within us.

Teach us to know the Father, Son,
And thee of both to be but one.
That through the ages all along,
This may be our endless song:
Praise to thy eternal merit,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit

**The Revd Richard Andrews,
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