THE PRACTICAL DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Genesis 1: – 2:4a
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28: 16-20

Rev Rod Horsfield
© Wesley Church Melbourne

Introduction: You know how it goes. At the end of the meeting we all stand up, hold hands and “say the Grace together.” Why do we say this particular bit of Scripture as a matter of course? And what does it mean? If you’ve ever wondered, stay tuned! And if you’ve never wondered, listen because what it means is important for life in today’s multi-faith and politically conflicted world. For today is Trinity Sunday, the day we celebrate one of the church’s most important doctrines.

Everything that needs to be said about the gospel and who God is, is contained in that simple statement of faith. And that statement is strong medicine for those people who still imagine God to be an old man with a long beard who sits up in heaven pulling the levers that operate the world and waiting for us to make a mistake so we can be suitably punished. (And don’t laugh at that because I have met people who believe God is just like that!)

We are still reeling from the atrocities of the Manchester bombing and have been confronted by an attack on people in our own back yard, Brighton. But there are other forces, Paul called them “principalities and powers” that threaten the flourishing of God’s creation. Global capitalism; Nationalism; Militarism; Forces that threaten the shalom which is God’s will for the creation. These forces have made a god of their own agendas. So their destructive actions are a result of what they believe in. So when we confront the powers opposed to God’s purposes in Jesus Christ, it is insightful to ask: “What god are they worshipping?”

On this day in the church year, we celebrate that for Christians God is Holy Trinity – not a great big amorphous distant divine being but a trinity of persons in perfect community and harmony. That understanding of God is what we claim and affirm whenever we use that Trinitarian blessing. It declares who we believe God to be, and on that basis how we will act towards the created world and all other members of the human family.

Let us look at that statement and its very practical implications.
1. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: The first disciples were Jews, schooled in the belief that “The Lord is God and the Lord is One”. But they came to see from their experience of Jesus that the nature of God was being opened up to them. The way Jesus related to people was the way God regarded human beings. And that intention and action of God was summed up in the word “grace.” That word originally meant in Greek “that which gives pleasure” and was linked to the idea of loveliness.

But Christians gave it a new meaning by linking it to love. So in the New Testament “grace” means “wonderful kindness” - the generosity that takes your breath away because it is so thoroughly undeserved and freely given.

And the grace of Jesus Christ? It is that acceptance and love which Jesus showed towards those who knew they had no other grounds for hope of acceptance but grace. Remember Zaccheus? The woman caught in the very act of adultery? The thief on the cross? The woman at the well? In the grace of Jesus there is no moralistic judgmental God but One who offers himself to people freely and generously, even to the point of being willing to take their sins upon himself.

John Newton, the slave trader, experienced the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and out of the fulness of his heart wrote: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...

2. The love of God: We live in a world in which we are often prompted to ask “What kind of power lies at the heart of the universe?” We ask it when natural disasters strike people indiscriminately. What kind of God is the Creator of the world?

Many people answer this question in their own way and the answers of the world’s religions are many and varied. But what is true and what is the basis of our knowing? Christians claim that the God who seems lost in mystery has made himself known in the revelation given in Jesus Christ.

On the basis of Jesus life among us, Christians say that the heart of God is like that of Jesus who called God, ‘Abba, Father’. God is above all a God who loves. How can we be sure of that? We look to Jesus again, to that strange man on the cross. See, there is the power behind the universe. There is God in his glory – the glory of a love that gives itself to the uttermost for the sake of human beings like you and me. That love will not be overcome by the worst that human beings can do. It is that love which raised Jesus from the dead.

The Christian experience of God is an experience of being loved, forgiven and accepted. So God is no longer remote, distant, fearsome - but near to us, caring for us, waiting for us to
learn of and respond to God’s love which loves indiscriminately. It is a radical love which embraces even those we would label enemies.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God...

3. Fellowship (participation in) the Holy Spirit: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God are made real to people, brought home to them by the intimate work of God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

It is here we see why I called this sermon the “practical” doctrine of the Trinity. Paul writes these words to a congregation faced with great gifts and great differences. He writes to them as they struggle to be Christian in secular Corinth. He gives advice on how they should live as the community of Jesus and in the face of their diversity of nationality, race, class and background he finally tells them what is the source of their life together: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...

Their life together arises out of who God is – the way God is a unity in community. That is what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about. It is not about offering abstract answers to abstract questions. Or defending mathematical impossibilities. How could it be, since its whole point is that the human being Jesus, and his violent death and glorious resurrection, are the revelation in person of the one true and living God?

The doctrine of the Trinity is about the passion and compassion of the one true God for his battered and divided world: about the cross of Jesus Christ as the place where the power of empire did its worst. And how, through that cross, the warm, life-giving breath of God is going out to change hearts and minds; that through the tears and prayers and preaching and persuasion of those grasped by this grace and love, and sustained by this fellowship, reconciliation may come to the world that still waits for it. We’ve tried everything else; why don’t we try taking God seriously? Not just any old god, either, but the one spoken of in the gospel, this one Paul commends to the believers.

In these three realities, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit that we encounter the living God. Not as three Gods but the one undivided reality. For these three are one - the Holy Trinity, Father Son and Spirit, one God.

And our task, as Matthew records the last commission of Jesus, is to go into all the world and preach this gospel – tell the world who this God is and what God has done.

Conclusion: In the face of all opposition to this God; against the claims and counter claims of other belief systems, Christians bear their humble witness to this God who is named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We do not own God so that we can use belief as a weapon
against others; our way of understanding as a rule by which we judge others. Our witness can only be our pointing away to this Other who alone is the source of the world’s hope.

And we remind ourselves of the truth of God, the holy Trinity, and the faith that sustains us in that task, by saying together whenever we can: Say it with me...

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

May this be the faith that sustains your work and witness and in the end, brings you home. Amen and Amen.