

Trinity Sunday

Other Christian denominations have some strange ideas. The Methodists have no priests nor bishops in the way that we understand them; the Baptists do not baptize babies in any circumstances; and the Salvation Army have no sacraments at all.

With these churches, and many other, we are not in full communion. That is to say we acknowledge that to be a Methodist or a Baptist or a Salvationist is different from being an Anglican and we accept that there are some issues on which we do not presently agree. For example, there is no interchangeability of clergy.

But we have no problem in accepting these and other groups of Christians as being just that - Christians. Not only Christians but orthodox Christians. We are happy for the members of these churches to receive communion in the Church of England on an occasional basis; we are happy for their clergy to preach on an occasional basis; we are happy to share non Eucharistic worship with them. And the focus of that degree of unity is belief in the Holy Trinity. We are united in our belief that God is one, in three persons.

The Holy Trinity is the acid test. There are those who call themselves Christians without believing in the Trinity - they are called Unitarians. There is a Unitarian chapel in Leeds near the railway station; there is a disused one in Pudsey near the Post Office; Neville Chamberlain came from a Unitarian family. But Unitarians and Trinitarians have little to say to each other. There is so little common ground. Ian Paisley and the Pope have more in common than do Unitarian and Trinitarian Christians.

So, why does it matter ?

Perhaps the way to answer that question is to ask what life would be like if we were Unitarians: if we did not believe in the Trinity. Unitarians, like us, believe in God the Father. Unitarians also believe in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but do not believe that either is or was God. For a Unitarian, Jesus of Nazareth was a great prophet; he may also be the son

of God in that he was adopted by the Father at his baptism. But he is not God the Son; in his nature he was human and no more. Exactly like you and me.

And if Jesus is human and no more, what is left of the Easter story? The crucifixion is a minor tragedy: one more decent man meets a nasty end; the resurrection is an interesting miracle and the Ascension a happy ending - at least for Jesus. And the whole world is unchanged. All that is left of Jesus is a collection of ethical teachings. Perhaps not bad but perhaps not earth shattering either.

And what is the Holy Spirit if he is not God? He is perhaps like an angel. Not human, but definitely part of creation, a messenger for God. So in our own lives we come to know a messenger for God but we never meet God himself. God becomes a remote figure who for all practical purposes may not even exist any more.

Once I might have said "a remote figure, just like the Queen." Except that little while ago I found myself in a meeting made up of lots of men and women in funny golf chains. I said to one of the women, as a kind of chat up line, "Are you a mayor?" She assured me she was and I asked where of. She told me Wakefield. I then asked whether she had enjoyed her year and that was her cue to tell me about how she had entertained the Queen for lunch on Maundy Thursday. What she most remembered was the accessibility of the Queen; the ordinariness; the way she taken the mickey out of Yorkshire accents; the way she had dismissed her husband as simply being 'grumpy'. For all that the Queen may seem remote she is enough of a politician to put herself about and make herself known to the population. In the end even the Queen is not remote.

And nor is the Trinitarian God. The Holy Trinity is a God who is with us in every moment of the day. The Holy Spirit who makes us grow in love, the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to do what otherwise we could not do, the Holy Spirit is not a messenger from God, not a lackey, but God himself.

A few years ago I met man who had made an unusual journey, from being a choirboy in my previous church to becoming first Jew and then a

Rabbi. I asked him why he had made that journey. He replied that what appealed to him about Judaism was that it contained all the ethical parts of Christianity without the supernatural. Much the same could be said of Islam - Muslims have no problem in accepting Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet and have no problem with God sending messengers. I am sure neither that Rabbi nor any Muslim would see it like this, but from my perspective their religions take the parts of Christianity that are hard work - the ethical parts - and dispense with the parts that bring joy and strength – the supernatural.

What brings joy and strength is the knowledge that the death and resurrection of Christ make a real difference because it was God who was born in Bethlehem. He was under no obligation to share our human life, our suffering, the consequences of our sin. But he loved us so much that he did.

What brings joy and strength is the knowledge that it was God who died and rose in Jerusalem. Something earth shattering and curtain rending took place on that day. For two thousand years Jewish priests had offered sacrifices in Jerusalem. On the first Good Friday Jesus offered the ultimate sacrifice – it not a good man but God himself who died on the cross. No wonder the sky was darkened; no wonder there was an earthquake; no wonder rocks split in two. (Matthew 27:51)

What brings joy and strength is the knowledge that God did not leave us to our own devices on that first Ascension Day. The Holy Spirit who comforted and encourages us today, in Pudsey, is none other than Almighty God himself. That is the heart of belief in the Trinity.

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