Trinity Sunday, 2020  
*Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a, 2 Cor 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20*

Well, it’s Trinity Sunday again, the Sunday which marks the transition point in our lectionary readings from the historical account of the life of Jesus and the earliest church to focussing on His teachings and those of OT and epistle writers. It’s a bit of an awkward Sunday in a way, because its focus is on a doctrine of the church - the doctrine which explains to us - as far as such an explanation is even possible - the nature of the Godhead - the Holy Trinity. Now I recognize that some of you are thinking: *doctrine - booor-ing!!* And others of you may be thinking - *the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I've got that! What's to say?*

But I want to say this morning that in many ways the doctrine of the Trinity is at the foundation of our faith - we need to know and to think about this God who invites us to draw close to Him so that He will draw close to us. [James 4:8] So, don’t turn off and tune out just yet...

Now a Christian doctrine is simply a statement of belief about the nature of God or some aspect of God’s intentions for the church and for the world. A doctrine often grew out of a controversy in the early church and the drawing together a wide council of prayer and study of the whole of scripture to work out a clear statement of orthodox faith. So, we won’t be able to find a doctrine laid out and conveniently explained by turning to a single event, prophecy or epistle. The doctrine of God as a Holy Trinity is essential to what it means to be a Christian and is the first of the statements of faith in the 39 Articles, the foundational doctrinal statement of the Anglican church. [p.699 BCP]

Here’s how it came about. Less than a hundred years after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus questions began to arise about the nature of God and how Jesus and the Holy Spirit fit into the godhead.

**Jewish Christians,** familiar since their birth with the Shammah: *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,* questioned whether the Christian faith was advocating 3 gods in talking about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. If so, this was a huge problem. Much of the struggle and history of the nation of Israel was to stand apart from the worship of many gods. In fact, I suspect that we have little idea of just how unique and odd the Jewish people must have seemed to the surrounding nations who had a sophisticated sets of gods they thought ruled over the world, and who required elaborate sacrifices to ensure peace and plenty.

**Gentile Christians** also grappled with the notion of the Trinity. Some argued that Jesus is merely a part of God’s creation - a man born in time and space whose
existence began, like every human being at the moment of conception, not co-eternal with God but a normal man who lived a particularly godly life - but certainly not God. The Holy Spirit, they suggested, is a kind of emanation of God.

Others argued that God is indeed one God. It's just that he's related to us at different times in different roles. In Old Testament days God related to his people as Father, in the New Testament in the role of the Son, and since Pentecost God relates to in the role of Holy Spirit. A unitarian position

A third group were those who were quite happy to believe in God as 3 entirely separate and unique gods - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These were Tri-theists.

Church leaders began to examine the scriptures as they pondered how to present an orthodox understanding of the nature of God as He is revealed through the whole of Scripture. One vital question was whether there was any basis in the OT scriptures for the idea of a Trinitarian God.

As they examined the OT, it seemed that God had long been preparing his people to understand his triune nature. As they looked back over some of the OT stories from a post-resurrection perspective they saw that the pre-incarnate Christ had indeed appeared and helped his people in time of need. These are called theophanies - literally God-sightings. They saw Christ in the account of an Angel appearing to the run-away slave Hagar in the wilderness saving her and pointing her to reconciliation. They saw Christ as the fourth man in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace saving Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The creation story that we just heard pictures God creating the universe by speaking commands of creation - let there be light! Let dry land appear! Let the earth put forth vegetation! and so on. John's gospel identifies Jesus as the Word of God as it affirms In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

The work of the Holy Spirit was clearly evident at creation account too as the wind from God swept over the face of the deep, and as God breathes the breath of life into Adam. When God said, Let us make humankind in our image, God was speaking not so much as the royal 'we' but as the Triune God. There are many other examples of the Holy Spirit's working in the OT, anointing God's people for his work. The Day of Pentecost solidly confirmed person of the God the Holy Spirit.

It was at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 that a creedal statement was hammered out which made the nature of the Triune God quite clear. God the
Father, creator of heaven and earth, all that is seen and unseen. Then statements to make it clear that the Son was not to be regarded as an emanation of God, nor a second deity; but that he was simply God himself. Where the earlier Apostles Creed had merely stated the facts of Jesus earthly life - born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under PP, was crucified, died and buried. Rose again, and so on, the Nicene creed added a clear statement about Jesus' pre-incarnate existence. It's the same statement we use to this very day: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the father, by whom all things were made...* before it goes into his earthly life and purpose. It also makes further assertions about the person of the Holy Spirit. Where the Apostles Creed merely says, *I believe in the Holy Spirit* the Nicene Creed expands that to say: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the Prophets.*

Well, what does all of this mean to us? Is this Sunday just a history lesson about a doctrine of the church? How does it impact our lives and faith?

First of all we see that our God lives and exists in a community of perfect, mutual, self-giving love. This love extends beyond the God-head to encompass the whole of God's creation. Jesus' command to his friends - and to the church that would be founded by them through the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - was "love one another as I have loved you." [John 15:12]

Now, this love isn't a sentimental Hollywood kind of thing or in any way self-serving. Rather the appeal is to what one writer describes as "mutual-othering" - the pouring out of self for the other, mindless of self. There's a very clear edge and appeal to holiness in this kind of mutuality, for it is surely not our normal human way of being who so often driven by our desire for self-comfort and personal fulfilment. Thus, at the end of his second letter to the people of Corinth and just before he evokes the blessing of the Trinity over them Paul urges not only individuals but the church as a whole: *Put things in order! Be of one mind! Live in peace! Greet one another with a holy kiss!* "Put things in order" can be perhaps more clearly translated as "work your way to perfection." It is as we bring our human wills under the lordship of Christ, following his example and growing in his likeness both as individuals and as the church of God, are able to subvert our own wills and desires to God's... and thus be able, like the Godhead we worship, to know the mind of Christ, to live in peace, and to love others as He has loved us.

Secondly, the Trinity is a model for work in the church for the kingdom of God. While Trinity is One, and each member of the Trinity acts together in unity, each
has a unique role. In the same way each of us has a unique combination of gifts and talents, experiences, temperament and personality traits. Each of us has an important role to play and is an important part of the whole. This truth will not only impact how we think about ourselves and what we have to offer, but also impacts the way we offer ourselves in community.

Thirdly if we are effectively to carry out our Lord’s commission to the church to make disciples we need to understand that it is as a community that God the Holy Spirit must be given permission to work in power through us to take the message of salvation into all the world. We are to treat all people with the same dignity, generosity and love that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit treat one another in the unity of the Godhead. We live in a very individualistic age. We struggle at times over being required to act for the common good, recognizing the value and dignity of every human being – regardless of colour or race or gender. But recognizing that God's loved was poured out to us in creation and in Christ quite apart from our deserving of it, so we are to take His good news into the world.

Paul’s final trinitarian blessing to the church in Corinth is one we often repeat as the church: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

As we take time to think about the very nature of God as the Holy Trinity, let us pray that we will come more fully alive to his call to us to be his witnesses in the world as individuals and as the church together. Amen