



A tourist looking round a church came across an emblem made up of three intersecting triangles, symbolising the Trinity, and was heard to ask, why have they got the warning sign for nuclear radiation on the lectern?!

Now I hope you don't get nuked from the lectern today, but maybe the tourist was actually onto something! We can quite easily manufacture a God of our own making and our own size; we can major on attributes of God which appeal to us and conveniently overlook others, forgetting that our God is an awesome, powerful, living God far beyond our imagining or understanding. If not, God wouldn't be God! That wonderful Psalm 8 always recalls me to the 'bigness' and mystery of God, just as looking at the bigness of the night sky. That's important to remember as we consider today the Trinity - one God, yet revealed to us as Creator, Christ and Spirit. God who is 3 persons but one God. How do we approach what seems a contradiction in terms, a mystery? We can get into a muddle trying to understand or explain the Trinity. Perhaps it's actually easier to **experience** the Trinity than to explain.

For the doctrine of the Trinity grew out of the *experience* of the first Christians. It was the attempt of monotheistic Jews, people who'd had it drummed into them since childhood that there was only one God, their attempt to express what they had come to know and see of God in **Jesus Christ**. They had come to believe that Jesus was more than just an ordinary human being, his claims to forgive sins, to be one with God, his miracles, his death and then most of all his resurrection from the dead. All this seemed to point that Jesus was indeed God in the flesh, the Son of God.

And then they tried to fit into this their experience of the **Holy Spirit** with them at Pentecost and since, that somehow as Jesus had promised, this was the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, with them in love and power. So their understanding of God was stretched, not through ideas of their own invention, but as God progressively revealed more of Godself to them.

If we try to study the Trinity as an abstract truth or even as just an interesting academic exercise, we soon end up frustrated by the limits of our language and of human analogy. This was certainly the case for the Greek and Latin speaking Christians of the early Christian centuries.

But if we look at the Trinity in the light of our **experience** of God at work, sending the **Son** into the world to bring us to a place of reconciliation with God, sending the **Holy Spirit** to us to help us to grow into the image of God, then we see how vital the Trinity is to our Christian life and experience. It's not just a dry dusty theory for theologians to argue over, but God dynamically active in our lives – God with us, as Matthew's Gospel ends: 'remember I am with you always' (Mt 28:20).

And our response? **Worship**. The Athanasian creed in the 1662 Prayer Book which most fully and at great length sets out the doctrine of the Trinity begins, "We *worship* one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity" and that's where we begin too. I often find that it is in **worship** and **prayer** that I move most easily between the persons of the Trinity.

I want to consider today 3 kinds of church you might come across today, which focus on 1 person of the Trinity more than the others, we could call them **the Creator church, the Jesus church** and **the Spirit church**. Each church has real strengths, but I think you may see that they all have real weaknesses as well.

Let's begin with **the Creator Church**: this church focuses on God who creates and sustains life, who gives order and stability to society. This church sings hymns like 'O God our help in ages past', 'Immortal invisible God only wise', 'O worship the King all glorious above'. They have a strong concept of God's majesty, transcendence, awesomeness. They affirm God as creator of all, and want to include all people of goodwill in their life and fellowship, all who have a common concern for the wellbeing of humanity. They are the church of the community, they take seriously Jesus' summary of the law, to love God and love neighbour. They value God's good creation and the gifts God gives to people to be used in God's service and the service of others.

But this church may not be quite so good at coping with the reality of sin and evil in the world, they may struggle to help people when they feel they have failed God's high and holy standards, or are struggling with feelings of guilt, or are in need of knowing God's forgiveness. People may feel that God in this church is high and lifted up, but they may wonder how the gap they feel between them and God can be bridged. They may be longing to hear if there is a ladder between heaven and earth, if this God knows what it is to be human and weak and frail. This church too may be unwilling to allow the Holy Spirit to interrupt the 'decently and in order' pattern of worship they are comfortable with, and they assume that their God is comfortable with also.

So much for 'the Creator Church'. How about '**the Jesus Church**'? Here in worship there is an expectation that God's power will be released through the preaching of the Word, and the Gospel which confronts, convicts, challenges

and converts to Christ. The sermon is a proclamation of Christ as Saviour, and a call to repentance, conversion and faith in Christ. This church sings hymns like 'Amazing Grace', 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear'. In this church it is ok to talk about the realities of sin and judgement because there is the assurance of God's forgiveness made known to us in Christ.

The Jesus church may well have more precise boundaries than the Creator church, because it is more clear who is in or out, saved or lost. Membership belongs to those who are willing to confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and it is constantly seeking to bring people from beyond its boundaries to faith in Christ. A danger for this church can be that it can end up seeing the world just as a disaster area to rescue lost souls from, and it can become a Christian ghetto, with no great vision for the world and society around it. But a real strength of the Jesus church can be that it is willing to suffer persecution for its faith, because it follows a Lord who suffered for his beliefs and went to the cross for them. So the strengths of the Jesus church come from its response to Christ.

Well, what about **the Spirit Church**? This church focuses on the presence of the Spirit of God in and among God's people, empowering them for ministry. The signs of the presence of the Spirit are dynamic and public and expected, and the worship of this church is a celebration of God's presence with freedom and spontaneity. This church sings "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me" and a whole lot more songs in lengthy times of worship and mutual ministry. This church can tend to be exclusive of anyone who doesn't share a similar experience of the Spirit, or it can be inclusive of anyone who looks remotely 'spiritual'! This church celebrates the gifts of God's Spirit, but it may mean that people not obviously gifted or healed can feel failures as Christians, and that those who are obviously gifted can feel their value is in their gifts and ministries, rather than in the gift of salvation hard won at the cross of Christ.

This church expects God to be present, but sometimes forgets that everything is not yet understood or put right or healed in our world, because we still wait for the final coming of God's reign of wholeness for ourselves and our world. Sometimes this church expects too much fulfilment of God's promises in this present age, whereas the Creator and Jesus churches may expect too little. The Spirit church can focus so much on the supernatural, miraculous works of God that it tends to devalue God working through the ordinary things of life, in the provision of daily bread as well as the feeding of the 5000!

Perhaps the Spirit church needs to learn that God works through order as well as spontaneity, while the Creator and Jesus churches probably need to trust that God works through spontaneity as well as order!!

Well, I hope you realise by now that I have deliberately stereotyped or parodied those 3 sorts of churches, and I have spent time in all 3 kinds of churches during my ministry and have valued what I have learned from each of them! Perhaps you recognise tendencies there from churches you've been part of – not this church of course! I hope you've seen that these 3 churches have both strengths and weaknesses. Their strengths derive from the fact that each of them is responding well to one person of the Trinity, but their weaknesses may come from their neglect of the riches of the other persons of the Trinity, and so they may have a limited picture of the fullness of God.

One of the most frequently used doxologies in Anglican worship is the Gloria: 'Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit'. We are called to give glory to the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our church life and worship, continually growing in our knowledge and experience of God.

You can imagine that it might be a lot easier to 'specialise' in the Creator or Christ or the Spirit, it might be easier to reach agreement in church life! But to be a church of God the Trinity asks us to accept a greater variety of responses to God, of ways of thinking and believing and worshipping, some of which may be hard to combine, but they all build up to a picture of a greater God! For example, worship in a church of God the Trinity may need to be at times stable and formal, at times challenging and direct, at times spontaneous and open to the Spirit's leading us in a new direction. Just try putting together a combined service, from different churches or congregations, to see how difficult it can be, and yet how stretching and enriching for us if we let it be so.

How very much easier we might think to limit our view of God, but growth into the image of the one true God is only possible through a wholehearted response to God as Creator, Christ and Spirit. Perhaps a challenge to us all today is to reflect on our faith, our church life, our worship, our attitude to people in other congregations or churches, our favourite Bible verses, hymns and music. Do I worship and live out my faith in God, Creator, Christ and Spirit? Is there a person of the Trinity I am neglecting or would like to know more, so I may grow in faith, in prayer, in worship?

Pray that God the Holy Trinity will reveal more of God to you today in all God's fullness. Thank God for the privilege of being invited to share in the life of the Trinity, as our beautiful Trinity icons portray. May our lives here so reflect the life of the Trinity, that others too may experience the fullness of God who is Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.