



The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 12th June 2022

Call to Worship:

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

May the peace of the Creator be upon our world
recreating, rebuilding, making new.

May the peace of Christ be upon our world
rescuing, reviving, making new.

May the peace of the Spirit be upon our world
reconciling, refreshing, making new.

Prayer/Meditation:

We have heard about you, God of all power.
You made the world out of kindness,
creating order out of confusion;
You made each one of us in your own image;
Your fingerprint is on every soul.
So we praise you.
We praise and worship you.

We have heard about you, Jesus Christ:
the carpenter who left his tools and trade;
the poor man who made others rich;
the healer who let himself be wounded;
the criminal on whom the soldiers spat
not knowing they were spitting in the face of the divine;
the saviour who died and rose again.
So we praise you.
We praise and worship you.

We have heard about you, Holy Spirit.
You broke the bonds of every race and nation,
to let God speak in every tongue;

You made disciples drunk with grace;
You converted souls and emptied pockets;
You showed how love made all things new
and opened the doors to change and freedom.

So we praise you.

We praise and worship you.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Psalm 8

Hymn 35:

God is unique and one
Father, Sustainer, Lord!
Patterns of life were spun
by his creative Word.
Of his intention, love and care
we are with growing trust aware.

Love came to earth in Christ,
our common life to share;
choosing to be the least,
willing a cross to bear.
He died, he rose, that we might live
and all our love, responding, give.

The Holy Spirit moves
people to trace God's plan;
such inspiration proves
more than the mind can span.
Each listening heart is led to find
the will of God for humankind.

He shall for ever reign,
ruler of time and space;
God in the midst of life,
seen in the human face.
We give expression to our creed
by love in thought, in word and deed.

Reading: John 16:12-15

Reflection:

Today is Trinity Sunday; not the most popular among preachers because the doctrine of the Trinity can be a bit of a puzzle. Three puzzles, in fact. A trinity of puzzles.

The first puzzle is the most interesting, probably the most important, and unfortunately the most obscure. It arises out of the fact that the most influential part of the Church's whole history - certainly as far as the formulation of Christian beliefs and doctrines is concerned - is the very period we know least about. Between the end of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth and the writing of the first of the gospels, there elapsed a period of forty or fifty years. During that time there was no such thing as the Christian Church, there was simply a sect within Judaism that followed what came to be known as 'the Way'. Followers of the Way were Jews; they gathered in the synagogues to worship along with other people of the Jewish faith, but as well as reading from the Jewish scriptures, they remembered somehow the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and interpreted their Jewish faith in the light of what the community remembered about Jesus.

During that obscure and unknown period, from which there is no written record of anything about Jesus, there developed beliefs and doctrines that were particular to the Way - until finally the followers of the Way separated from their Jewish roots and became a new religion - the Christian Church. It is from this emergent church that we get the earliest of the New Testament writings - some of the letters of Paul and the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke - and in those writings we can already see the beginnings of a doctrine that is very different from the Jewish concept of God. For in Judaism, God is most definitely and indivisibly one. From its earliest days, that was Judaism's uniqueness. While other tribes worshipped more than one god and some had a whole pantheon, the God of Israel was One.

In early Christianity, in the New Testament, there are already hints that, while God may be One, there are certain distinctions. Matthew describes Jesus as Immanuel - God with us; the writings of Paul are peppered with references to a very special relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God; Matthew gives an account of the risen Jesus telling his disciples to go into the world and to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; in the passage from the gospel according to John which we read today, Jesus makes a speech in which he speaks of his relationship with the Father and the Spirit.

The first puzzle - the one with no solution - is how this primitive Trinitarianism arose out of a Jewish sect. We can speculate about the influence of Greek philosophy, but the details of the development are obscure.

And that obscurity left the leaders of the early church with the second puzzle of the Trinity. For them - and we're talking now of the period between about 200 and about 400 AD - the unity of the church was vital. The church was fragile, and as long as there was no definite and distinct body of teaching then it was quite likely to fragment into so many small pieces that it would disappear altogether. Unity was a matter of survival, and in order to maintain unity, it was necessary for everyone - and by everyone we mean all the bishops and church leaders - to believe and understand the same things. So began the process of solving the puzzle of the Trinity, based upon the few hints and clues in the Bible, and borrowing heavily from the world of philosophy. The argument was really trying to solve a paradox: God is indivisibly One: God is distinctly Three. Those Church Fathers engaged in this debate had to tread an incredibly narrow line. If they over-emphasised the oneness of God, they were accused of diminishing the divinity of Christ or the reality of the Spirit: if they under-emphasised the oneness of God, they were accused of having three separate Gods - both of which were heresy and would lead to excommunication or worse. To complicate matters, they went into incredible detail about each part of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, and debated, for example, whether the Son had been part of God for eternity, or whether the Son was part of creation: if he was eternal, then how could he have been human? if he was created, then how could he be truly the divine God?

And just in case this wasn't baffling enough, the debate was conducted in two different languages, Latin and Greek, thus ensuring that the two sides were constantly misunderstanding one another by taking meanings from statements that had never been intended, and then having their responses misunderstood by the other side. It's therefore something of a miracle that by the council of Constantinople in 381, the doctrine of one God in three persons was finally agreed and ratified by the whole Church. It was then left up to St Augustine in the early part of the fifth century to put the finishing touches to the doctrine in his work *'On the Trinity'*, which outlines the doctrine of the Trinity as understood by the church more or less to the present day. So the second puzzle was successfully solved.

But the solution of the second puzzle has become the third puzzle for us today. Looking up the word 'Trinity' in Baker's dictionary of religious terms, you will find this helpful definition: *'Term for the orthodox Christian conception of God as one being in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not susceptible of simple explanation.'*

It seems that the result of the great Trinitarian debate of the early centuries of the Church, satisfactory enough to those involved at the time, turns out to be just another puzzle, not susceptible of simple explanation. And yet it is presented as a vital part of our understanding of God, and a foundation of our faith.

In the statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church, which we recite together on special occasions - usually ordinations and inductions - we accept with thanksgiving the witness of the Nicene creed; and in the Nicene creed we find the very Trinitarian statements that we believe in one God; we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, who is True God from True God; and we believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. We are Trinitarians - but that's the puzzle. How do we make that 4th century statement of faith which we still accept today - how do we make it relevant to our church and our world? That's the third puzzle, and there's only a hint of a solution to it.

It has been said that for humans to try to describe God in detail is like horses trying to describe what it is to be human. It can't be done. We are not God - how can we know what God is like? We may be able to see the effects of what God does, we may even be able to feel the presence of God in and around us, but to say *God is this* or *God is that* is the height of arrogance and self delusion.

Bearing that in mind, if we now revisit the first puzzle - the early development of the idea of the Trinity - we will see that it must have developed out of experience. The writers of the gospels and the epistles did not have a fully formulated Trinitarian doctrine in mind, but they had the experience, and perhaps the recollections of people who knew Jesus handed down through three or four generations, that in Jesus of Nazareth they had met the most godly, the most divine person they had ever encountered, a person who had opened their eyes to a new way of looking at the world, a person who was so different and so full of love and compassion for the unlikeliest of people that they called him the Son of God, even Immanuel - God with us.

And as they met together for prayer and worship - Luke describes this in the Book of Acts - they were aware of a power greater than anything they had known, a power which enabled them to communicate their message to people of all nationalities and backgrounds; they found that their story transcended the faith of their Fathers and was as relevant for the gentile world as for the Jewish community - and this power they called the Holy Spirit.

It is pointless and counter-productive for us today to attempt to contort our belief system into something that accords with the understanding of 4th century church leaders *unless* we can truly say that the God of the Church Fathers and the Nicene creed is also *the God of our own experience*. And part of our journey of faith together as a worshipping community is just that. To seek and experience God the Creator in the world; to know and follow Jesus of Nazareth as the one who is God-filled; and to find the power of the Spirit in our lives and in the Church, that we might be true both to the tradition of our Church and to the life of the Kingdom of God.

Hymn 303:

Spirit divine, attend our prayers,
and make this house your home;
descend with all your gracious powers;
O come, great Spirit, come!

Come as the light: to us reveal
our emptiness and woe,
and lead us in those paths of life
where all the righteous go.

Come as the fire; and purge our hearts
like sacrificial flame;
let our whole life an offering be
to our Redeemer's name.

Come as the dove; and spread your wings,
the wings of peaceful love;
and let your Church on earth become
blest as the Church above.

Come as the wind, with rushing sound
and Pentecostal grace,
that all of woman born may see
the glory of your face.

Spirit divine, attend our prayers;
make this lost world your home;
descend with all your gracious powers;
O come, great Spirit, come!

Prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God,
beyond all space and time,
greater than our minds can fully comprehend,
ruler of all that is, has been, and shall be,
we give you thanks for who you are
and all that you have done for us.

Loving Creator of all,
we praise you for your kindness and mercy

by which you sustain us and provide for our every need;
you are full of goodness and compassion
caring for us, that we may never be without hope.

Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
we worship you for coming into our communities
to be our friend, even our brother;
for showing us the magnitude of the love of God,
revealing God's saving power and God's forgiveness,
and offering us a new beginning.
We lift your name on high, Lord Jesus,
for loving us fully
and giving yourself for the world on the cross.

Holy Spirit, free and mysterious as the wind,
powerful as the fire,
we worship you for blowing new life into our hearts,
for purifying us from our sins and faults,
for teaching and reminding us the words of Christ,
and leading us in his light.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
God of gods, and King of kings,
with awe and wonder, joy and gladness
we offer you our thanks,
and pray for your creation,
its nations, and peoples,
for your church,
ourselves and all in need.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
fill our sin-filled world with your eternal light and love,
so darkness and power of evil will not rule,
but your Kingdom will be established in power and glory!
May the flame of your Spirit blaze with purifying fire
driving evil from hearts and minds and establishing your peace.

We pray these in confidence and trust,
our eternal God,
who is Life-Giver, Life-Saver, and Life-Renewer
now and forever.

To you be the glory,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
today and through all eternity.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply
in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 605:

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
Christ our Head, who, throned in glory
for your own will ever plead,
fill us with your love and pity,
heal our wrongs, and help our need.

As you, Lord, have lived for others,
so may we for others live;
freely have your gifts been granted,
freely may your servants give.
Yours the gold and yours the silver,
yours the wealth of sea and land,
we but stewards of your bounty,
held in trust as from your hand.

Come, O Christ, and reign above us,
King of love, and Prince of peace:
hush the storm of strife and passion,
bid its cruel discords cease:
by your patient years of toiling,
by your silent hours of pain,
quench our fevered thirst of pleasure,
shame our selfish greed of gain.

Son of God, eternal Saviour,
source of life and truth and grace,
Son of Man, whose birth among us
hallows all our human race,
in your love you prayed the Father
that your people should be one;
grant, O Christ, our hope's fruition,
here on earth your will be done.

Benediction:

God's blessing be upon us
as we go into the world in Jesus' name.
May we strengthen and encourage one another
in our shared vision.

And may the blessing of our adventurous Creator God go with us.

And may the blessing of the Son,
who showed us how to live,
re-shape us.

And may the blessing of the dancing Spirit
joyfully enable us in our renewed living.

Amd may the three-fold blessing of the One God be with each of us and with all those we love,
today and for evermore. Amen