St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 31st May 2026 i.e. Trinity Sunday. This Sunday was also one of our regular Healing services, with anointing and laying on of hands

Isaiah 40:12-end [the RCL had a more limited selection of 40:12-17, 27-end]
2 Corinthians 13:11-end
Matthew 28:16-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Two out of our three Bible readings this morning have been chosen to highlight the tentative steps the first Christians made towards what became the Christian doctrine of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, these same texts also have the side-effect of making the doctrine of the Trinity seem like an afterthought: something that you tack on to the end of a letter, or the end of a story. These verses also make the Trinity seem like a formula, something inert and functional, rather than a dynamic truth that is woven through everything, making sense of everything. That's what I think a doctrine of God should be.

The exception to this, and I think the most interesting of our three readings this morning, is our Old Testament text, from the prophet Isaiah. We might expect a book that was written a long time before Jesus was born to be the "least Christian" of our three readings. Isaiah may not be useful as a proof text for Christian doctrine, but it makes up for it in playfulness and insight.

Isaiah is concerned with what looks to him like idolatry: things that are not God are being worshipped as if they were. Some idols are more obvious than others. In the West today we like to think that we're above worshipping manufactured objects as gods; so we can laugh along as Isaiah ridicules people who have a household god made by some guy down the road [40:19-20]. It's a bit easier to understand why someone might worship the sun, the moon and the stars; but Isaiah points out that these things are also the creation of a celestial Artisan [40:22, 26]. We may not be able to make anything like them, but God can – and does.

But Isaiah doesn't stop there. Twice in this argument, God asks something like, "To whom then will you compare me?" [40:18, 25]. And God is expecting the answer, Well, no one. But actually… comparing God with things is how most Christians have talked about God since the beginning. Metaphor is the foundation of all our language, so our doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to say something meaningful about God using language that we've learned by talking about other things.

I've mentioned the formulas in our second and third readings today; eventually Christians felt comfortable saying that God is "three persons in one substance".

That formula – "three persons in one substance" – leads us into one particular temptation that I find interesting on this fifth Sunday of the month. The word "substance" is obviously a piece of theological jargon, and we are likely to treat it with caution; but the word "person" is more familiar. After all, we use it all the time. If you ask someone on the street what a person is like, they'll present you with a familiar list of attributes: a person is someone who loves, and is loved in return; a person reasons and remembers; a person chooses and acts … On the back of all of this, lots of theologians have said that the Trinity is a model for how we should be as a society: God is a communion of persons, and we should be like God. That argument takes on a slightly different flavour depending on the theologian you're talking to.

Unfortunately, "personhood" is highly contested in our society. There are theologians who are interested in disability, and who point out that "personhood" is a label that always intentionally excludes [e.g. John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, 2017; John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society*, 2010]. This isn't just splitting hairs: in my work both in the hospital and in the community I spend a lot of time around people who inhabit the margins of conventional personhood, people who our society struggles to include and love. I'm thinking particularly of the very old – people who are frail and confused; and also the very young, those who may (or may not) be born with physical and mental disabilities. There are others too, who are at the limits of what we call personhood: what do we make of those who will never be able to talk, or touch, or choose, because of conditions like autism? Are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit like these persons too? And if the three persons of the Godhead are not like these human persons, are those with dementia, or Downs, or autism persons at all?

With all of these questions going around in my head, I value what Isaiah has to say more and more. Towards the end of the chapter we read, God asks what I feel is a deeply pastoral question:

> Why do you say, O Jacob,
> …
> 'My way is hidden from the Lord,
> and my right is disregarded by my God'? [Isaiah 40:27]

When we define God in a particular way, we disregard those human persons who don't fit. But that's *our* failure of justice; God refuses to be complicit. Isaiah carries on by saying,

> [The Lord] does not grow faint or weary;
> his understanding is unsearchable. [40:28]

The point here isn't that God is like an able-bodied human, only better; rather, God shows his sovereignty in "[giving] power to the faint, and [strengthening] the weary" [40:29]. God is in fact working against the narrowness of our definitions, the limitations of our understanding. Saying that God is a communion of "persons" is risky, for all the reasons I've said; but it is also unexpectedly fruitful. So, for example, we call God "Father"; and in doing that we give honour to human fathers. But we also sharpen our awareness of the ways those fathers fail, the ways they do not resemble God. The same goes for "persons": the more we notice that God does not fit into our categories, the wider we need to make those categories.

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In a few moments you'll have the opportunity, if you wish, to receive anointing and prayer for healing. Whenever one of these healing services comes around, I always find myself asking the same question: when we pray for healing, what is it exactly that we're praying for?

Many kinds of healing are beyond our power, and we have no other choice but to pray. But there are some kinds of healing which are within our power. Modern medicine can do a lot, obviously; but so can words, and the choices that those words represent.

Each of us will at some point or other stray into the margins of our language of personhood. We may do that with our own bodies, our own minds; we may do it through the experiences of our loved ones, or through contact with strangers. When we step into that contested space, and when we feel unsure about who is worthy of love and attention, we have the choice to bring God's healing with us.

> See, the Lord God comes with might,
> And his arm rules for him;
> His reward is with him,
> And his recompense before him.
> He will feed his flock like a shepherd,

He will gather the lambs in his arms,
And carry them in his bosom,
And gently lead the mother sheep. [Isaiah 40:10-11]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.