

Trinity Sunday

We are going to start in Rome, at the church of Sant Andrea della Valle. It is about 100 metres south of the Piazza Navona, you have to walk slowly if you are going to finish your ice cream before you go inside. When you do go inside your jaw will hit the white marble floor, because the walls and the roof are ablaze, there is more gold leaf here than in the head verger's dressing room and where there is no gold leaf there is painting: there are cornices and cherubs and martyrs and confessors rushing towards heaven.

And, in the middle of this riot, there is a dome. Look up and you look straight into heaven. You are watching the Virgin Mary being assumed into heaven at her death. It is breathtaking, and it quite quickly gives you a pain in the neck. Looking at heaven is a problem. It is always a problem. The painter of this dome, Giovanni Lanfranco, thought this was his masterpiece, other people thought so too, it is all clever perspective and bravura composition. Then the theologians came, with their bloodless lips and their mean little eyes. Lanfranco had filled heaven with saints, all them watching Mary arrive in glory. And the theologians pointed out he had got it wrong. Some of those saints should not be there – they could not possibly have already have been waiting for Mary; she died before they did.

Lanfranco got into trouble because he tried to show us one specific moment in heaven, he tried to show us a bit of history, the day Mary died and arrived in glory. The problem is that there is no history in heaven; heaven is eternal. The saints are there forever. There are no Tuesdays in heaven, no yesterday, no coming soon, no later on. That is very hard to paint; it is very difficult for us to even *think* about God's throne. Our words, our ideas are not up to the job. That is the problem we hit on Trinity Sunday when we set out to describe God.

So, to be clear, Christians, you and me, are the people who know that they do not know God. It is important to get this straight. There is a rather alarming sort of believer, eager to tell you that they know exactly what God thinks and what God wants. When a man with wild eyes arrives at your door and tells you that God has spoken to him and God wants you to give all your money to him, shut the door in his face. No one has power of attorney for God; no one can tell you what God thinks, The point is that we *believe* in God, but none of us *know* God.

Let's try to get to grips with what we mean. I *know* there is a dome in the church of Sant Andrea Della Valle. I can take you there and show it to you. What I understand about God is different. I can stand up here and talk to you about God, but only because God has shown himself to me. Do you see the difference? I can show you the dome in Sant Andrea, you can go and look, but I need God to show himself to me. I need God to take the initiative. Herbert McCabe, used to say that we think about God the way a child thinks about her mother. A little girl knows that her mother loves her, she is sure of it, (I suppose you could even say she *knows* it) but it is not something that she works out by looking at evidence and coming to a conclusion. It is something *given*, the little girl takes it for *granted*'. That is how we believe in God, it is given. I really can say *I believe in God*, but that is not the same thing as saying that I understand God and know all that I would like to know. To say that God has revealed himself to me, is not the same as claiming that he disclosed all that there is to know about God.

So, when we say the Creed we begin with God.

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,*

It all begins with God; not with me and what I think I might know. The creed is not a set of propositions you reel off as if this was a kind of exam. I

*I know about Norman architecture
I know how to cook Brussel sprouts
I know the names of the kings and queens of England
And the address of my aunty Mary*

The creed is not that kind of list. It begins with what God gives and it records what I am given, what I receive and trust.

So, the creed starts with God and it moves quickly. The Creed tells us God is *Father* and *Almighty*. Now, that confuses people. An almighty father conjures up images of a big man being important. That is not what the creeds means. God is not a father, like I am a father, monosyllabic in the mornings and prone to dancing badly at parties. What the creed wants us to know is that God the *Father* is the source and origin of absolutely everything.

What God the Father does is create, love pours out of God and it is creative love. God does that all the time. That is really important. God does not create once, a long time ago. God does not sit in a chair and watch stuff happen for a bit and then leap up and make decisions, smite a few Amorites and make a volcano in Peru. God never changes. Before I preached this sermon I climbed the pulpit steps, after I have preached this sermon I will sit down. God is not like that, there is nothing God is no next, and no before; God has no agenda, no list of things to do. God loves creatively and constantly. We believe in a Father who is the source of all things and a God who is *Almighty*. What that means is that constant unrestrained loving purpose, total loving purpose is not going to be turned aside, not going to be frustrated. So, not an old man being important and overbearing habits; but something unlike anything else I have ever encountered. In the presence of this God we do not take notes, or come away with messages; nor do we even paint pictures, we kneel, we repent, and we adore.

When we say *I believe in God* that is what we are saying, we are saying that it is God who takes the initiative, God who starts things. This God is almighty, not just the beginning of things, God is the direction of travel and the end of things. When we say *I believe in God* we resign from the terrible project which insists that I have to be in control. To say *I believe in God* is to trust in a love that will not let me go.

By now you are nearly ready to sit your Doctrine Part I exams. We are going to do Part 2 and Part 3 really quickly.

The creed goes on to say:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God*

I said that God shows God to us, and this is how God does that. Jesus is the account God gives of himself. God shows us what God is like and the startling thing is that God looks like the one thing we know best, ourselves, a human life. Do you remember the beginning of John's gospel, *In the beginning was the Word*? That is John telling us that what God does, at the very beginning, is to speak a word of explanation about himself. It as if God sets out from the beginning to tell the story of himself. And the story isn't an *In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit* sort of story. It is not a myth, not a parable, it is a biography. It is the story of Jesus Christ. It is a story about how to be human. We go on telling that story all the time. It is the story of you and me.

The creed has lot to say about that story of Jesus, it tells the story

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried...*

And then it goes on to say

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

Now God the Father we know, God the Father is the constant creative almighty love. God the Son we know, that is the story about God told in a human life. God the Spirit, well that is a bit harder to pin down. You can't actually see the Spirit, you can only see where the Spirit has been. Like the wind, you can't see it, but you do know your umbrella is inside out. The Spirit is where God is at work now, where that love is making things happen, where the story is being worked out, explained, and understood. The Spirit of God fills the spaces between us, interpreting, connecting, carrying on that work of creating.

And that is the doctrine of the Trinity. One God encountered in three ways, a God who is the source of everything, a God who is the story we tell, a God who is the experience we have.

Why does this matter? Why do we need to know this? We need to be reminded that God comes to meet us. It all depends on God, not us. The great temptation is to make ourselves a project; to assume control; to try to take possession. The truth is that it is not up to us to save ourselves, we do not bear that terrible responsibility. Redemption is the work of God. God has the initiative, God is the beginning and end of that story.

This is the cathedral of the holy and undivided Trinity. We are dedicated to this God. We are dedicated to that constant love, dedicated to telling the story, dedicated to looking for where it is happening, searching ourselves and our city for the life God is living. God comes to meet us and we are blessed indeed.