

**Sermon for Trinity Sunday, Eversley
adapted from St Mary's Old Basing, Trinity Sunday 2015
*Romans 8:12-17 and John 3:1-17***

Start of service:



Show children:

Fidget spinner

Jaffa cake

Why might I have seen all these things used in an attempt to describe God? (Encourage them to use their imaginations!)

There are all things that have 3 parts to them, but in some way, shape or form are one:

Fidget spinner has three arms which have to work together for it to rotate properly
Jaffa cake is biscuit, orangey bit, and chocolate – they aren't the same on their own!

If the significance hasn't yet been got: explain they are all ways I've seen used to explain the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Song: to the tune of *Frere Jaques*:

*God the Father, God the Father
God the Son, God the Son,
God the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit,
Three in One, Three in One*

None of these illustrations are really good enough explanations for something it's really difficult to understand.

But if we know God in each of these three ways, do we really need to understand how they fit together? Should we even try to understand God?

Sermon:

Nicodemus, a scholarly Jew, thought he'd got God taped. As one of God's chosen people, he assumed, in common with his colleagues, that God would remain at a distance, to be worshipped according to long-held traditions held safe in a

select few families who told everyone else what to do. Jesus, an ordinary Jew, didn't fit that mould; he laid less emphasis on abstract theory or neat pre-conceptions of the nature of God and his action in the world.

For Nicodemus, any public display of curiosity in this Jesus could have risked his academic credentials, so darkness was his friend. Jesus was only too happy to stretch Nicodemus's mind beyond its comfort zone into a less theoretical space; the realm of a personal encounter with God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Specifically, Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand that anyone, not just the Jews, was invited to encounter God, and that the reason he could assert this was because he spoke with the authority of being God: "Very truly I tell you, WE speak of what WE know and testify to what WE have seen". Jesus was saying that God's presence wasn't merely with him, he was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:1) and therefore was perfectly at liberty to use what we might term "the royal WE", when speaking of what God thought. He and God were one and the same, and he knew it.

Which is probably why this scripture is used on this Trinity Sunday. For today is the day when as Christians, we formally admit that all our efforts to explain the nature and action of God in the world and in our lives will fall short of what God is really like, and how he actually acts. Get the

ice/water/steam out, the Jaffa cake or the fidget spinner, and someone will say it's wrong, it's not like God the Holy Trinity at all. They are what can be called a heresy, because they're incomplete, they forget something, or they limit God, whatever our best intentions in using them.

But Trinity Sunday is also the day that each tiny footstep we take to encounter and understand the nature of this "royal WE" should not be denied out of hand because it is likely to be wrong, but celebrated as the sound of the God's people engaging in an adventure of discovery with the full extent of God's glory and majesty.

A few years ago, I visited Coventry Cathedral. Even if you haven't visited, and I thoroughly recommend that you do if you haven't, you may well have encountered images of Graham Sutherland's epic four story high tapestry of 'Christ in Majesty' (*show the guide book picture*). In Sutherland's own words he designed it to be a "palpable presence", and it dominates the Cathedral and any encounter with God within that space.

My encounter centred on Jesus' wounded feet, and nestling between them, the image of a human. That diminutive figure, is me,... and you. There I stood, convicted, humbled and protected by the risen Christ. Coventry is a place that is associated firstly with the destructive force of humanity's craving for power symbolised in a cross of nails; secondly, with the over-arching love and glory of God displayed in the

resurrection and ascension of Christ, and thirdly, with peace and reconciliation offered through works of hope undertaken in the power of the Holy Spirit. I found myself wanting to know more of how I can form a relationship with the awesome wonder of a God that is both that simple and that complicated?

Another image that I find particularly useful with regard to the Trinity, is in the complex simplicity of a hair plait, the sort of braid you might put in a child's hair (*use 'hair piece'*). It is possible to suggest that by its nature a good plait of hair will contain three bundles of hair of equal size, each being made of the same stuff yet each different, one hair formed from the same DNA as the next, yet being subtly different in colour, and texture, so that the three equal bundles are in fact different but bound together as a single braid, in harmony with itself and stronger than any individual hair. I haven't got enough hair for everyone to try plaiting it, but I've got some wool, all the same, but in three different colours. The effect, and the likeness to the Trinity that that is God, is similar. (*Hand out pre-started braids, suggest the children get an adult to hold it and help them, but adults can do it too.*) It is however, only an image, and I am quite sure that any half-decent theologian could drive a coach and horses through the analogy and shout heresy!

But for me, what is important is not so much the nature of the hair in the plait that is God the Father, God the Son and

God the Holy Spirit, but who is holding it, weaving it, continually working together the loose ends. For the hair stylists are you and I!

It is in the awesome nature of our God, that he has placed himself in the world, and given us the opportunity to gather together what we discover of the strands of who he reveals himself to be. Ours is the task of bundling the three handfuls, testing them for weight and size against each other, plaiting them through our lives.

For example, each time we gather a bundle of scripture in our hands or stand regarding an image of Christ in whatever scale, if we handle what is revealed to us with care and humility, we will find different strands of God's revelation of himself. We can draw these into our plait of understanding him, which we hold in trust for our own benefit, and for that of others.

So as I stood in the presence of Sutherland's "Christ in Majesty", I found myself forced to echo Isaiah's cry of individual and corporate repentance, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips". And yet I was also brought as close as I've ever been to announcing with Isaiah that "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!". There was a tension here that showed me where "we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and yet through faith in

Christ, we are shown to have the opportunity to see, face-to-face, revelations of God's glory.

The reading from Romans today helps us with what lies behind that tension; we are shown that if we are in thrall to the ways of the world, we are not alive to God in Christ Jesus. In other words, we have to put to death the cravings that we have for worldly things, and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us freely into this relationship of grace that God wishes to lavish upon us all, so that we constantly yearn to be in the presence of his majesty, "the royal WE".

He might have done it under cover of darkness, but Nicodemus's curiosity had placed himself, even if unwittingly, in the presence of "the royal WE". This itinerant miracle worker bore the majesty of God come to earth. In the form of a man living simply, he taught that God's love was available to all, even the leaders and teachers of a faith who had got stuck in a rut of thinking they knew all about God.

As we stand in the presence of Jesus in our Bible readings and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, what is Jesus offering our curiosity as today's contribution to our plait of faith? What can we bind into the image of God that we hold, a strand that doesn't limit our understanding, but adds to it? What is God revealing to us today about himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Or, are we comfortable not trying to

solve the mystery, but just asking him to reveal himself afresh to us day by day?