

GOD

A Sermon preached at Pusey House, Oxford on Trinity Sunday, 7th June 2020

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The words of the majestic figure – “high and lifted up” on his throne of solitary and impossible glory at the climax of Isaiah’s great vision in the Temple. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (*Isaiah 6.8*)

Why “us”? Why that curious plural for the mighty and singular one, “high and lifted up”, on his throne? Is it not somewhat strange that in the middle of this vision of the Lord in his unapproachable and splendid glory there should be this plural pronoun, this suggestion of number, to challenge the unity of the vision? Strange, and perhaps more than that to the strict monotheist, unsuitable, or outrageous?

Strange, maybe, but by no means unique as an unexpected plural pronoun used by and for the One God in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. In the first chapter of

Genesis, at the climax of the first of the two Creation myths God is heard to muse thus: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...” and he goes on, of course, to do that very thing. “Male and female created he them”.
(*Genesis 1.26, 27*)

“Us”, then, a plural pronoun for a single God.

Traditionally, Trinity Sunday is supposed to be a day to avoid preaching. It’s the day on which that mysterious frog is supposed so unexpectedly to invade the throat, the day on which the wit and wisdom of the curate is suddenly especially beguiling. The day – who knows? – to invite a compliant bishop to ascend the virtual pulpit steps. Whatever else – conventional wisdom traditionally maintains – keep out of the pulpit on Trinity Sunday!

I have to say that I have never understood this point of view: the whole point of Trinity Sunday, surely, being to say something important about an absolutely fundamental – *the* absolutely fundamental – word and idea at the heart of our faith and our living.

It's a day for saying something about that most commonly used (and commonly misused) of all words in Church and outside it. It's the word – the idea – that lies at the heart of all our worship and our praying, our witness and sometimes our blasphemy too. The word at the heart of a great deal that is happening out there, as well, in the wider world; at the heart – indeed – of all reality.

The word, of course, is God. God knows. God help us. Thank God. O my God. God as swear word or expletive. God to be thanked or cursed, to be cried out in crisis or in ecstasy.

It's a tiny word on all sorts of lips in all sorts of circumstances: God – God – God. And today is a day when perhaps we can dare to say something of what we mean by it. Today is a day for us all to become theologians, people with God-words (for that is what theology is), words to set around the word God, itself.

For philosophers (and for atheists, too, for this god is easy to disbelieve in) “God” is a proposition, an idea or a premise, if you like, which – if you accept it – explains things: creation, existence and so on and, perhaps even

suggests something about values, ethics, rules of life to inform life within god-given reality.

The philosophers' god is First Cause from which all else follows and knowledge of the mind of God (if that is possible) is vital to understand, make sense of and value reality. God as proposition – the god of the philosophers – is single, undependent, uncontingent and unconnected.

Either God is or God isn't and that is the decision we make: a proposition to accept (with consequences) or to reject (with consequences). It's as simple as that.

The God of the Bible, by contrast, who says "Who will go for *us*?" is far from simple. The God who in Christian reflection on Scripture and experience is known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons and one God, is not simple at all, and no mere proposition, either.

The very heart and essence of this God is not merely that he exists (such as is all that one can say or deny about the philosophers' god) but that he *is in essence* relationship. One God – a plural pronoun. One God – three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Stare deeply into the Bible's God and you will find a being which *of its nature* reaches out, engages, loves. These are not mere activities or attributes of God that he may or may not choose to indulge in or manifest. No: reaching out, engaging, loving – this is the very nature of God, the very definition of the word itself.

As the writer of the First Letter of John catches it: “God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.” (1 John 4.16)

God is not a Thing, an independent, unconnected Being. Quite the contrary, God *is* connectedness: connection, indeed, and commitment. God is that which connects us to one another in bonds of love, loyalty, affection and shared life.

Far from the separateness and distance, the unapproachability and unfeelingness of the god lauded in the hymn *Immortal, invisible, God only wise* (that I sometimes think should never be sung at any gathering that wants to describe itself as Christian!), the Trinitarian God of our proclamation exists at the most basic and

fundamental level as that power of connection that binds us one to another and teaches us how to be human.

It's a lesson – how to be human, how to connect, how to *love* – that (God knows) our world and our communities on this side of the Atlantic and the other badly now and always need to learn and re-learn, as the news of these last few days has so amply illustrated.

This is the reality and mystery that we – theologians, people searching for god-words to stand behind the God-word itself – express in the poetry of Christian theology in the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity. God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three persons in One God: exchange, engagement, reaching out: *Love*, in a word, all contained in the unity of the Divine.

And this is desperately, vitally important as the value of human life – of black lives especially, male and female created in the image of God – is asserted and contested.

Today is not the day to avoid preaching or doing theology: today is the day – and today's the Doctrine – that must stand at the very centre of our exploration of the true and endlessly fascinating nature of our God, and – therefore – of our study of what it is to be human in the image of God.

The God we worship and proclaim cannot be explained or described in the terms of a scientist or a technician: those are wholly the wrong sort of language. You can do that with a proposition – with the god of the philosophers – but you can't with a relationship.

You can't explain a love affair or the bond between mother and child or what makes a happy and fulfilled marriage over many years. You can't describe in cool and clinical terms suitable to the laboratory the love that binds you (or bound you) to your life partner or parent or child or dearest friend. You can't explain or describe these

things and to try to do so would be ludicrous or insulting. And you can't describe or explain God, either.

No: talk about love and relationship, emotion and commitment – this is the language not of scientists and technicians but the business of poets and musicians and artists. And it is this talk – in poetry, in music, in image – that theologians (and that's you and me today, remember) are engaging in when we speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God.

No other language than deep poetry, soaring music and abstract and challenging picture making will do for this day, the day on which we may dare to say something of what we mean when we say:

GOD.