Fourth Sunday of Easter – 11 May 2025

Message – Learning from the Trinity

Creator, Redeemer, Giver of New Life, draw us into the mystery of you, the Triune God. **Amen.**

Our gospel passage today has carried a lot of weight through the centuries. It was a key passage in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine that, in one form or another, we affirm every Sunday in our affirmation of faith.

Those of you getting worried that I am going to make some clear statement of how we must understand those affirmations, please relax. Those of you hoping that I will give some clarity to those affirmations, please lower your expectations. Even the Early Church Fathers and Mothers had only limited success in that enterprise.

My experience as a priest is that most people struggle with some part of our faith. Very often the struggle is with some aspect of the Trinity: that God is three persons and one God; that Christ is fully divine and fully human; that the Spirit is a separate person of the Trinity, separate from the other persons of the Trinity. And that is just for starters.

Many people who have thought about the Trinity in any depth will have had some kind of struggle. It is beyond our understanding. If we hold on to belief in the Trinity, the destination is the same for all, that this is a mystery but that even a mystery can give us insight and show us how to

follow Christ. The perfect love found in God is the perfect love we are trying to find in life.

In English it is hard to convey the force of what Jesus is saying in the last verse of the reading nor the contrast to what he has been saying too this point.

John's Gospel has Jesus in conflict with various groups at many points. This is the Third conflict with a group simply titled *'the Jews'*. It is clearly not every Jew and our best guess is that the arguments reflected the argument that Christians were having with the authorities in the synagogues at the time when this gospel was written.

The starting point had been Jesus's claim that he was the Son of God. Such a claim was to say that he was equal with God. Oddly enough, the Jewish authorities saw this as blasphemy. It is easy for us to lose sight of how extraordinary the idea of God being one of us and walking among us is. I suspect we would struggle in their place.

To this point, all the arguments have been focused on Jesus but in this one the argument moves to a focus on the first person of the Trinity. We can easily hear the emphasis as being on Jesus but the emphasis is on the first person of the Trinity, the FatherMotherOriginator: *'My Father, that which he has given me is greater than all things, and no one can seize [it] out of the hand of the Father.'* And then Jesus says, *'The Father and I are one.'* We might like to think we would react better than those to whom Jesus was speaking but most of us struggle when our fundamental beliefs are challenged.

We are hearing this passage without its context. Not only is this the third argument with the Jews but it follows teaching on the good shepherd and is followed by a return to Jesus's claim that he is the Son of God, which the Jews protest, *'you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.'*

Jesus is able to point to the works that he has done in the name of the first person of the Trinity as evidence that what he says is true. God is very clearly working in and through Jesus. And, though the authorities cannot see this, Jesus heads off across the Jordan, to where John the Baptist ministered, and many came to believe in him there.

To rest the entirety of our understanding of God as three coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial, persons so heavily on this one passage seems, at best, il-advised. Yet, we need something that point us to the mysteries of God.

Personally, I find the claim that God is love to be more compelling. Self-love is not the love of God and so God is love only makes sense with a God who is somehow community at the same time as being one God. A trinity seems the minimum requirement for this!

All this so far is a long way of saying that God will not be judging us on the accuracy of our doctrine but rather on whether we are faithful followers of the way of Christ, which in this part of John's gospel is the sheep who follow the shepherd. Those who hear the shepherd's voice.

Another challenge of this passage is that it implies predestination, a doctrine on which I am ambivalent and

that I tend to put in the mystery basket. We simultaneously have to choose whether to follow Christ while also being chosen by God. The group labelled *'the Jews'* are not Jesus's sheep and because of this do not believe, which is the opposite way around to that which we might expect. We might expect lack of belief to come first but here it is being one of God's chosen that comes first.

It is probably not possible for us as humans to understand the mystery of being chosen and having free choice. I have yet to read a convincing explanation that honours both ideas. We are back to holding together apparently incompatible ideas, mystery in which lies truth.

In the midst of this passage that has provoked so much theological debate is also an amazing encouragement. You may have noticed it when I gave the literal translation of the penultimate verse: '*that which he has given me is greater than all things*'. We, the sheep, are greater than all things.

I doubt that many of us good protestants think we are of any account at all. But that is to underestimate the lengths to which God went to show us the way of life in all its fullness. God sees each and every one of us as precious, greater than all things.

For the first readers of this gospel, not only was this passage addressing the challenges they faced in sharing the gospel in the synagogues but it was also a source of encouragement. Today, we face challenges too. Perhaps, sometimes not so dissimilar challenges. The idea that

someone who walked among us was God and that God would die for us is quite incomprehensible, never mind the resurrection. How will we convey the truth of this to others. Accounts of the signs of Jesus are, for most people, not going to do it.

We convey the truth of what we believe by the way that we live and follow the way of Christ. We take up our cross and we live the life of a servant of others, not a doormat, but someone who truly cares for others, someone who sees others needs and is prepared to help them as best they can.

We do this as fragile human beings, remembering the example of St Peter from last week. Fragile human beings who will from time to time fail and who, when they recognise this, God will forgive.

In responding to Christ's voice, the voice of our shepherd, we are drawn into God in ways we cannot imagine. Jesus told the disciples that they were one with him, just as he was one with God. By implication, we become one with God, undoubtedly imperfectly, yet also knowing that we are trying to reveal the love of God in our lives.

My hope is that we may all have the grace to recognise that we are all almost certainly wrong in some of our beliefs and so be generous to others and united in our desire to show the love of God to one another and to our wider community.

Amen. Amen.