

Dear Friends,

This quarter begins with two significant Sundays in the Christian year and the life of the church: Pentecost (4 June) and Trinity Sunday (11 June). Pentecost recalls the descent of the Holy Spirit on the first Christians (Acts 2:1-11) and was traditionally followed by a bank holiday in England – but it is Trinity Sunday that, some years ago, caused one ministerial colleague to remark, ‘I always take that Sunday as holiday!’ I think he was joking, but of course if preaching on the Trinity were less than notoriously difficult, there would be no joke.

Christians are committed to belief in one God, and yet we also believe that God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the early church, for over 300 years, some of the greatest minds of history wrestled with these challenges. What they believed (or sometimes a statement countering what they did not believe) is expressed in the historic creeds. The Nicene Creed was adopted when the council of the church met in the city of Nicaea (now Iznik in northwestern Turkey) in A.D. 325, though it did not emerge in the enlarged form we now use for some decades. In the traditional statement of the creed, Christians express their faith in God in this way: One God, The Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father (incarnate, fully human, crucified, risen, ascended, glorified, coming again); and the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, with the Father and the Son worshipped and glorified.

The Bible is abundantly and consistently clear that there is one – and only one – God, our creator, but it is also clear that salvation is the work of God. The inevitable conclusion must be that either the saving work of the Son and the Spirit are of no value because they are not the work of God, or are of inestimable value because, like the Father, the Son and the Spirit are, by their very nature, God. The doctrine of the Trinity makes this latter understanding of the Bible possible because it recognises the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit to be distinct persons with one essence. These persons of the Godhead are co-eternal (none existed before the others), co-equal (none has superiority over the others) and consubstantial (none has any part of the divine essence that the other two do not have).

In the last century, Christians who worshipped in the Free Churches (neither Anglican nor Roman Catholic) often contended that while we did not say the creed week by week, we sang it in the hymns of our Free Church heritage. I wonder whether that is still the case. When we worship, we must, in so far as we are able, continue to declare the truth about God, being prepared to express both simple and more complex belief in the person and nature of God, in three persons, each person in essence fully God – alongside the affirmation that there is only one God. John Mason Neale translated a verse of a 6th or 7th century hymn in this way:

Laud and honour to the Father,
Laud and honour to the Son,
Laud and honour to the Spirit,
Ever Three, and ever One,
Consubstantial, co-eternal,
While unending ages run.

God bless

John Haley