



Sermon: 11th June 2017

Who is God?

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

A man dies and goes to heaven. He happens to have been a member of the Church of Scotland. The Archangel Gabriel meets him at the Pearly Gates and takes our friend on a guided tour. He points out different areas with groups of people praising God, “that’s the Baptists over there, and there’s the Methodists, and that little group is the Episcopalians.” Our friend points to a high wall and says, “what’s behind that wall?” “Oh,” says Gabriel, “they’re the Catholics- they think they’re the only ones up here.” That joke is told in many different ways, and, of course, the butt of the joke differs depending on what religious tradition the narrator comes from. We all have a tendency to think that we have a monopoly on the truth and if you don’t agree with me then of course you must be wrong.

We’ve seen that illustrated powerfully over the last several weeks in a variety of ways. We’ve seen it illustrated in the recent political campaigning, perhaps particularly in the TV debates where the discussion became extremely heated over a variety of issues.

We’ve also seen it illustrated in the terrorist attacks that we have experienced recently. While it’s unfair to blame religion for these attacks there is no doubt that in the minds of the perpetrators the problem is that other people do not agree with them.

Even here this morning there will be a number of views on a variety of issues. There will be different political views, although I think the results of Thursday’s election has left no one rejoicing. There will be different views on religious matters, and on what the Bible clearly says.

There will be different views on worship; what hymns we like, whether or not we like responses, whether we like individual or common cup at communion, et cetera, et cetera.

But the truth is, perhaps frustratingly, on many issues there is no right or wrong answer, there are only preferences. And when it comes to worship, everyone worships God differently and there is no right or wrong way to do it. In fact, our approach to worship has much more to do with our personality than it does to do with what is acceptable or not acceptable to God. The more introverted among us are likely to prefer quieter and

reflective worship which gives them the space to think and to respond to God internally. The more extroverted among us are more likely to prefer more upbeat worship, with lively songs.

Neither is right and neither is wrong, they are just different.

One of the problems in the church, of course, as my opening illustration pointed out, is that we tend to think that our way of doing it is the right way and tend to reject what others do as being inappropriate in some way. The Reformation had its roots in many, many, things, most of which did indeed need to be reformed, but one of the things which gave rise to the Reformation was the way that worship had developed. There was a reaction against the centrality of the priest in worship and what was seen as a disenfranchisement of the laity. There was certainly a need to recover a sense of worship belonging to the community of faith and not just the privileged few. But when we, in the Reformed churches, rejected Roman Catholicism we kind of threw the baby out with the bathwater, there were many things that we could have kept and probably should have kept! And I think one of the things that we lost was that sense of the awe of God that you find in Roman Catholicism. And that's a real shame. We certainly have a sense of God as Father, Jesus as brother, and therefore a sense of family, closeness, and community. Reformed worship as it has developed has become less ritualistic, more informal, and perhaps God seems more approachable. This is a good thing; however it is not the whole story.

Today, of course is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday we think about God and who God is, and it's a good day, therefore, to explore some of the aspects of God that we might not consider very often. It's a good day to try and recapture that sense of awe of God that I think we have lost.

One of the things that makes this such a good day to think about that sense of awe is that the doctrine of the Trinity is so difficult to understand. Three in one, one God and three persons; not three people, not one person with three different modes of being, three in one. Three in one! We do indeed have an awesome God. Nowadays, the word awesome is used every day to describe things that are very far from awesome. The dictionary definition of awe is, an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful yet we use it often to describe things that are actually quite normal and every day. But if we think about it in its original meaning, then we do indeed have an awesome God. Our Psalm today gives a good picture of the

awesomeness of God. Here the psalmist praises God for his greatness and wonders why he takes anything to do with us.

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” Out in the countryside, far from the light pollution of the city, when we look in the night sky we can see for light-years. The universe is indeed teeming with life; planets, stars, moons. Myriad expressions of the creativity and the imagination of God. When we look into the cathedral of the sky do we not feel small, unimportant, insignificant? We are so tiny, so irrelevant, in the face of this vast and rich creation. Yet, in spite of the fact that God has created this world, this universe, and many other universes beyond this one, he pays attention to us, as the psalmist said, “he made us a little lower than the angels, and crowned us with glory and honour!”. And then he gave us this world to look after and care for. As our current moderator, the very Rev Dr Derek Browning, put it, “within the vastness of the universe, the God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer knows our names.” In naming us, in giving us status within his creation, God invites us to work in partnership with him, invites us into the community which is the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This partnership with God is made even more explicit in the verses from Matthew. If the Psalm reminds us of our responsibility towards creation, these verses remind us of our responsibility towards our communities. In this little scene disciples waver between adoration and indecision, for some doubted. Yet Jesus, in spite of their doubting, gives them the great commission; “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” And then, in an echo of the miracle of his birth, a fulfilment of his birth name, Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, he tells them, “and surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” And here is a truth that is truly awesome. Jesus, God, with us, always with us.

And today we will hear four people confess their faith in this awesome God. And here today at this table, in a spiritual truth that is indeed awesome, we will meet this God in bread and in wine, the means that he has given us for our sustenance. This table is here and now, but it is also set in eternity. As we sit around this table, we are welcomed into the fellowship of the Trinity, we are seated in the presence of God, God with us, God for us. What a privilege, how can we not feel awe at being invited in to this presence, to this

community, to this relationship. God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, how majestic is his name in all the earth, three in one, our awesome God.