

## Trinity Sunday. Exodus 3: 1-15. John 3: 1-17

Who is God and what is he like? That's a question that people down the centuries have asked. One way the Christian church has answered it is by saying (as we sang in our opening hymn) that we worship "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity".

It was an idea that was hotly debated by the early church as they formulated the creeds, the statements of belief that we still use, and modern theologians are still writing about it. Perhaps it's such a familiar idea to us that we don't give it very much thought, but having a special Sunday to ponder the Trinity is valuable as it can lead us to a deeper understanding of God and help us to worship in a way that God deserves.

Over the Jubilee weekend many people were interviewed and asked questions about a time when in the past they had met with the Queen. People wanted to know: what was she like? What did she say? How did you feel when you met her? And they were all different. Some had met her in a very formal sense, perhaps when they received an Honour. Some had spoken to her in the street when she had been out meeting the crowds. Some had worked for her and had seen her when she was out of the public eye. Lots of anecdotes helped us to know some new things about the Queen.

The Bible is almost entirely a record of different people's encounters with God from which we can begin to piece together an impression of who God is. Today we have heard two of them. So, how can Moses and Nicodemus help us to understand something about what God is like?

Firstly Moses: he's a young man out on the hillside looking after sheep. He sees flames of fire coming from a bush that appears to be alight, but it doesn't burn up completely. That's interesting! Flames of fire, just as the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost, denoting the power and presence of God. It was interesting to Moses too. He is curious so he goes over to look.

He learns that this God is the God of his ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). He is the one and only God and he is a God who cannot be approached too closely. God says, "Don't come any nearer", not so much because he might get burned by the flames, but because the holiness of God would be too much for him to bear. What an amazing sight!

Secondly God tells Moses he will "come down to rescue" the Israelites from Egypt. So, this God cares about what is happening to his people and promises to come to their rescue. God is not just above and beyond us but is able to come down among us and Moses is given some instructions as to what he is to do. In some mysterious way God is going to partner with Moses. "I will be with you" God says.

Thirdly God reveals his name as "I am". "I am who I am" or it can be translated as "I will be who I will be". "This is my name for ever", God says "the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation." God is outside of time as we experience it. He is eternal. The past, the present and the future are all the same to him. He just "is".

Now, before this gets too mind-boggling, let's turn to Nicodemus.

Here was a man who was well-educated, a member of the Jewish ruling Council. As someone who knew the Scriptures, his understanding would have been (like Moses) that God was the “God of his ancestors” and a God who was eternal. The creator God. But just like Moses, he is curious. Who is this Jesus? Clearly someone who was close to God, because of the amazing things that had been done by him, but who exactly is he?

Jesus assumes that here is someone who is used to talking about spiritual matters and so he straightaway starts to talk about one of his favourite themes: the kingdom of God. He speaks of the need for people to have a new birth: a radical change in their thinking and believing. He speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit which is like the wind – the effects of it can be seen, but not understood or contained. He speaks about eternal life which God will give to those who believe in his Son.

“How can this be?” says Nicodemus. I don’t know why Jesus is surprised that he can’t take all this in, although I do wonder if Jesus isn’t very gently teasing him when he says, “You are one of Israel’s leaders, don’t you understand these things?”. Perhaps Nicodemus needed to let go of his learning and his pride, and to be awestruck by God, just like a child.

He was meeting face to face with Jesus, who called himself the Son of Man. An ambiguous title, but almost in the same breath Jesus says that God’s Son has come to save the world.

John, the Gospel writer, says in his opening chapter that many didn’t recognise who Jesus was, but “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Nicodemus needs that radical change in his thinking and believing that will come from accepting Jesus as God’s Son. The question is, will he take that step?

We can speak of the Trinity as being God the Father who is above and beyond us, as Jesus the Son, who is beside us and the Holy Spirit who lives within us, and we can see elements of that in our two stories – God the awesome one who could not be approached too closely, and yet would be acting within Moses on his mission to Pharaoh; Jesus who could be engaged in conversation, and the Spirit who was perhaps already at work in the heart of Nicodemus, teaching him the truth about Jesus. It’s a fascinating mix of all 3 persons of the Trinity.

One of the ancient creeds of the church, not one we use, is the Athanasian Creed. Compared to the one we shall use later in the service, it is very long and complicated. This is how it describes the Trinity: The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible!

The person who wrote Psalm 8 might have agreed with that sentiment when he looked at the whole of creation and declared “How majestic is your name in all the earth!” and as he considers God the creator of all, he wonders “What is man that you are mindful of him?” And perhaps that is still something that causes us to wonder. Why is God so interested in us? Despite God’s otherness, and holiness, and incomprehensibility, it seems he wants to live among us his creatures.

It’s a theme that recurs again and again in the Bible, from the beginning of creation where we see God speaking to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, through to

Revelation where we read “Look, God’s dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.”

God doesn’t let us come too close, for our own safety, *and yet* he responds to those who show curiosity. Moses went to look at the burning bush, Nicodemus went to Jesus to ask him questions. God responded to both of them, revealing something of himself.

This is our God - the creator, the God of ancient days and yet a God for all time, because he is outside of time, God the Son who came into the world to save us and to share our humanity, to be alongside us, and God the Spirit, the living God who moves in and through people in a mysterious way doing his work in the world. I’m sure that God wants us to be curious, like Moses and Nicodemus, to ask him questions, and most of all, to meet with him ourselves.

Let us pray:

Great and wonderful God,

With awe and wonder we come to you.

You are greater than our minds can fathom,

More powerful than we can ever imagine,

Beyond our highest thoughts,

You rule over all.

Give us this day a sense of your greatness and your gentleness,

A glimpse of your otherness and your nearness;

An awareness of your love which reaches out to us all,

Drawing us into fellowship with yourself, here and now.

Great and wonderful God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Receive our worship. Amen.