

GOD IN MANY GUISES

St Columba, 30 May 2010 (Trinity Sunday)

John Salmon

Introduction

Today is the day we celebrate the idea of God as Trinity ó a specifically Christian understanding of God.

Well, maybe not really an *understanding*!

How do you *understand* it?

It used to get explained by symbols like the 3-leafed clover: you know, 3 in 1. But nothing really gets to explain to us today what this Trinity thing is about! In the church it gets used in all sorts of ways, often with mixed up ideas that don't really belong together!

1. God Experienced in Many Ways

What Trinity is saying is that people experience God in their lives in different kinds of ways. [Ref Susan earlier...]

I'm sure you're aware of that. Most of us feel or think of God in different ways at different times. And when you talk with other people you realise they often have different experiences or ideas, too.

Many Christians and Jews and Muslims have had a sense of God as the creator of all things, powerful, separate from the ordinary world and having oversight of it ó a bit like the role of a father, perhaps.

At the same time, many of us also have a sense of God close to us, of God's energy flowing through us, helping us, providing comfort or courage.

So the Creator or Father God, and the Breathe or Spirit or Wisdom of God, have been different ways of talking about these different experiences.

Christians, of course, gradually came to understand Jesus like this ó probably not during his life, but soon afterwards.

So Christians see God as acting in and through Jesus ó a bit like the prophets before him, or like that figure of Wisdom working with God at creation. And Christians also came to claim Jesus as the Messiah,

the Christ, God's anointed leader of the people. Eventually Jesus was thought of as the Word of God or the Son of God.

All of those words, ideas, and experiences are part of our church life, part of what we say about God and Christ, part of our liturgies and worship. They're familiar and very old.

About 300 years after Jesus the church claimed the Father God, the Spirit of God, and the Son of God as all the one God: three, but still one. They used complicated and now old-fashioned philosophy to do this. So, many didn't really understand it then, or now!

More recently, thinkers in the church have gone back to seeing Trinity as a symbol of the variety of ways we experience and understand God or the energy of God in the world.

Trinity is a symbol of variety and diversity, rather than a description of who God is. (And maybe not just three!)

2. God as 'Diverse Community'

Even more interesting to me I think is another recent approach, in which the idea of Trinity understands God as a community

God, as Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life or whatever other words we use to describe the diverse persons who make up Godness are seen to live together, interacting lovingly with each other, showing us the ideal community.

This Trinitarian God is in Godself a diverse community just like the church, or any other community.

It's about different kinds of people, with different backgrounds and gifts, all working together, all focused on achieving one set of goals.

I think that's rather a good way to think of God.

Not as one being but as a cluster of activities and energies, flowing together to enhance the world and all of us.

This divine energy flow is still creating, enlivening, healing, encouraging, and liberating all those things Susan noted last week as expressing salvation

Thinking of God this way, our response is to model our lives on God's life, to work *with* God in these saving activities.

By this symbol of the Trinity we are being encouraged to act *together*, pooling our gifts and resources, enjoying our differences, recognising that a diverse community that works with common goals is a valuable part of society, and at the same time an image of God.

Conclusion

Speaking of God as the Trinity is a symbol.

- A symbol of the variety of ways in which we experience God's energy.
- And a symbol of the how a diverse community like us as church can be working together to make this world a better place.

Let's grab hold of that symbol of God, and act on it.