

How do we talk about our faith? How do we talk about our experience of God? Maybe we don't talk about it at all? One of the challenges of modern Christianity, and in fact modern spirituality is that much of how it is presented is based on person experience. While sometimes we may receive teaching in catechism, or we maybe study scripture – the 'I' questions are so often central to the way we describe our experience. Now there is nothing particularly wrong with this, but it sometimes make it difficult to describe how we experience God.

This week I had a number of profound experiences – and I just want to share two. On Thursday I was sitting at Laurence's Larder talking to a young Mum who was holding her 10 week old baby. We had met some months ago when she heavily pregnant, in temporary emergency housing, and she had nothing. She had returned on Thursday to allow everyone to meet her baby and say thank you, after now being housed, and the baby being more settled. It was one of the most inspirational conversations I have had in a long time. This very able young woman who is feeding herself and 3 children on less than £20 a week, and doing it successfully because she is good at planning and cooking. She uses her limited resources in a way that would put many of us to shame. Nothing is ever wasted. Her positive approach to a difficult situation was inspiring, I felt so overwhelmed by her ability to see what was good in the world, in her extended family, and in the community in which she lives. Her baby was calm, healthy and delighted the other guests at the Larder on Thursday.

What struck me was the ability of this young family to focus on the gift of love and hope that they had; rather than the challenges they faced which otherwise could have been overwhelming.

Then on Thursday night I was at the Churchwardens swearing in which this year was held at St Catherine's in Neasden. As part of the visitation three parishes shared 'Good news stories' about things that were happening in their parishes – stories where they had felt that they have been able to make a difference – from providing safe places for children to play; to members of the congregation learning to preach; to another church who are starting a soup kitchen.

What was common for me with each of these very different experiences on Thursday was just how profoundly God was at work. I guess each of these stories could be told without reference to God – but they weren't – each story showed an experience of God's care, or compassion, or grace and even love.

Sometimes we are so used to knowing who God is, that we forget to recognize God's presence. Sometimes were are so ambivalent about God we don't think to notice. And God's presence can be experienced in so many different ways. Sometimes in the creativity and resourceful of God's creation – other times in the encounter of the love of Jesus; and sometimes in the gentle push or nurturing of the spirit.

Today is Trinity Sunday – a Sunday when the church remembers the Doctrine of the trinity. But at its best it is a Sunday when we remind ourselves of the breadth of ways in which we can encounter, or experience God – or see God at work! Not just in one expression but in many.

The historical church talked about what they understand the trinity to be for more than 300 hundred years through various councils of the in the second and third century before even a basic agreement was reached – and it has been a topic of debate, tension and even division ever since. Is God Creator, Jesus and the Holy Spirit one?

So does the theology behind the doctrine of the Trinity matter? Probably not, but the concepts within the trinity underpins our understanding, and indeed relationship, with God. God, the creator of all things, sent Jesus, his son – and part of God's self to build a relationship with humanity. Jesus had been with God since the start of all time. When humanity destroys Jesus, Jesus returns to God and they send the Spirit to be the one on earth who maintains the relationship between creation and God. God creator, God the Son and God the Spirit are all the same and yet different expressions of the same thing – different states of the same being.

In this sense, trinity matters as each of us may build our faith on different aspects of this trinity and yet we each still have a relationship with the same God. But while the theology helps us to understand, and hopefully even to feel we belong – the key to the theology around the trinity is actually pastoral. Our understanding matters because it is about our relationship with God. We are not creatures in isolation from one another and from God, and so relationships matter.

It is no accident then the gospel reading from Trinity Sunday is a discourse between Nicodemus and Jesus. In this dialogue they too dance between this tension of theology and pastoral reality.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and does not ask Jesus who he is, but tells him what he has deduced about who Jesus based on the signs Jesus' performed. Jesus immediately begins to undo Nicodemus' certainty. No one can see anything clearly about God and God's kingdom, Jesus tells him, without being born from above.

Jesus picks up on words and concepts introduced by Nicodemus¹. and turns the conversation toward deeper truths again and again. With each repetition Jesus shifts the conversation from the smallness of Nicodemus' view to the largeness of life in God, from the signs on which Nicodemus and others base their hope to the invisible mystery of the Spirit.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1314

The depth of the conversation with Nicodemus is reached in verse 16 which is not only well known *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* It is both a statement of theology but also of pastoral hope – we are not alone, we are not unloved – rather we are embraced by God.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus he began by saying who he thought Jesus was. Each of us does this too. I don't know if you have noticed in the 3 minute sharing slot, that each of us has defined our faith in a sense of who we understand Jesus to be – and in some cases who we think Jesus or the church isn't! This discourse amongst ourselves and with God has continued through each generation. But does it matter that 2000 years after Christ we still struggle to define our faith, or the trinity or our relationship with God?

Ginger Barfield², writing on Trinity Sunday says No, rather what is crucial in our proclamation of the reality of God's activity in Jesus, in the world and in our lives. Or as we have heard through our story telling – it is not our understanding but rather our experience of God that informs how we live. Barfield would say that it is only through the awakening of belief through the Spirit that we come to know the fullness of God and that this is the story for Trinity Sunday. She says *"All else is mystery. All else is code language. All else is an attempt to render in our words what is God's word to tell. This is not a reality that we can claim to believe. It is a truth that we receive by faith through the Spirit as gift from God"*.

The leadership we offer as a community then needs to hold both our understanding and the mystery, at the same time of recognising that most of us encounter God through experience.

What I get from the readings today, and I guess through my experiences this week is the importance of our dialogue. The importance of us talking about where and how we encounter God. And that we like Nicodemus might have the courage to ask questions, or one another and of God so that our understanding might grow.

Yesterday I spent a lot of time sitting downstairs as people came to look at Helen's paintings, and then with Elainea who has hung some paintings in the chapel. Each of us was reflecting on the need to just relaxed into the space and see what happened. See what we see, see what conversations come. It was interesting reflection as we consider how we might also encounter God.

Regardless of how we define or understand the trinity, we all encounter God each day of our lives. And it is this which is the gift of Trinity Sunday – and it is this which is actually the gift of theology and pastoral care. For in both thinking and being – God is in our midst – and it is this that draws us to worship. Amen.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2467