Trinity Sunday, Year B, 30.05.21

I served my title in Dolgellau:

* for those not familiar with churchy language:
* my very first job as an ordained minister was in Dolgellau, in Wales

The church in Dolgellau itself

* has a church tower
  + clockface on three sides of the tower
    - the fourth side is where the roof of the nave is

One day:

* there was an issue with the clock and the clock faces:
  + all three clock faces were showing a different time

I remember my training incumbent saying:

* there is a sermon in that, somewhere

It’s something a lot of clergy do:

* file away odd things that have happened
  + as possible sermon illustrations

Lo and behold

* next Trinity Sunday
  + he used the story about the clock faces
    - as an illustration for the Trinity:
      * one clock
        + three different ways of relating to the world

Like all similes

* best not to think about it too much;
  + Two
    - perhaps even three
  + of the clocks must have told the wrong time
    - don’t suppose he was trying to give the message that only one of the persons of the Trinity tells the truth

Today is Trinity Sunday:

* the day when we think about the Trinity

The church has a doctrine called The Trinity:

* it’s the church’s way of trying to describe the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity
  + to try and make sense of a rather complicated situation
    - that in many ways is too difficult for us to understand

God can be hard to understand:

* we often talk about getting to know God
  + growing in knowledge of God

While these are important things

* there is a danger that they give the wrong impression
  + that they give the impression that God is knowable
    - that we can know God fully
      * we can’t

Just think about it:

* how well do we really know the people closest to us?
  + is it possible to know someone completely?
    - to know everything they think
    - to know exactly what they will do before they do it
      * never to be surprised by anything they say or do?

I have to say that I hope that that isn’t possible

* it would probably be terribly boring
  + if the people we loved
    - were incapable of ever surprising us
      * because we knew them fully and knew everything about them

We cannot know everything there is to know about the people we love

* if that is the case with people
  + how much more so with God
    - because God is so different to us
      * so much harder to understand
        + to get our heads around

There is the temptation to think that we need to be able to know God

* that growing as a Christian
  + is about growing in knowledge
    - not entirely untrue
      * but there is more to being a Christian
        + not possible to know God fully

or even to understand the Bible fully

I’ve been reading Vicky Beeching’s book:

* Undivided
  + from a Christian tradition
    - about certainty
    - about knowing God
    - about understanding the Bible

While at Oxford University:

* came into contact with Eastern Orthodox theology
* was told a story about an abbot
  + who was teaching his monks;
    - read them a passage from the Bible
    - asked them if they knew what it meant
      * several of them offered different explanations
    - the abbot then asked his colleague, Abbot Joseph
      * if he knew what the passage meant
        + Abbot Joseph answered he did not
* Truly Abbot Joseph alone has found the way, for he replied that he knows not.

Not knowing is, in a way, central, to Eastern Orthodox theology:

* tends to say what God is not
  + rather than what God is

So in Eastern Orthodox Theology:

* God does not hate
* God is not hateful
  + rather than ‘God is loving’
    - the idea is that when we try to define God
      * we limit God
      * putting God in a box
        + making God in our image.

It creates more space for God

* to be who God is

This way of thinking about God does rather appeal to me.

The doctrine of the Trinity:

* tries to tell us something profound about God
  + but it is important to realise
    - it is a way of putting into words
      * what people have sensed about God
      * about the way that God relates to the world
        + to us

Trying to describe something as complicated and spiritual as that:

* probably as easy as trying to describe a strange dream that you have just woken up from
  + have you ever had the sort of dream that is about someone who is a certain person you know
    - but they are also, kind of, another person you know
      * at the same time
  + or you are in one country
    - but actually you are also, at the same time, in another country
      * and then trying to describe that dream to someone else

That is what trying to describe our experiences with God can be like:

* clear
* absolutely logical as they happen
  + but almost impossible to explain or describe to someone else

In today’s readings:

* the main characters:
  + all have overwhelming experiences of God
    - that they are trying to describe
    - trying to make sense of

But they seem to know

* almost instinctively
  + that they will never completely understand
    - they will have to accept
      * it is a kind of mystery
        + that they will never fully comprehend

In the first reading:

* Isaiah tries to describe a vision that he has had
  + awake for a vision
    - not necessarily any easier to describe than a dream
      * impossible things are possible in visions

While you are having a vision:

* probably sounds normal and plausible
  + then when you try and describe it to and for others
    - you realise how strange and impossible it all is
      * and yet it is incredibly intimate and powerful to you.

Nicodemus:

* pharisee
  + someone who has spent his life
    - studying the Bible
    - studying God
    - learning about God

But in this story:

* he comes across as somewhat dense
  + slow to understand what Jesus is telling him

Probably because what Jesus is telling him is so far removed from what he has learnt

* from his experience
* his understanding

In many ways:

* Jesus is challenging all that Nicodemus knows
  + all that he thinks he knows about God

It’s all being turned on its head:

* that is why Nicodemus is slow to understand
  + not easy when the way you see things
    - is being turned upside down

Takes time to understand what you are being told

* to process it
  + to make sense of it.

Everything that Nicodemus thinks he knows

* is being challenged here

Kudos to Nicodemus for not avoiding the challenge

* for meeting it head on

I wonder if Paul’s words made much sense to the Romans:

* he is writing to a group of people
  + he has not met yet
    - writing to introduce himself
      * and what he believes

Paul is trying to describe how he sees God

* how he sees Jesus
* how he sees the Spirit
  + and what he thinks our relationship to God is

He has a decent stab at it

* in this passage
  + but I wonder how many of the Romans would have felt like Abbot Joseph
    - and would have had to admit that they did not understand the passage?

All three characters:

* Isaiah, Paul and Nicodemus:
  + are experiencing
    - or have experienced God
      * the overwhelming presence of God
        + they are trying to make sense of it
        + trying to make sense of God
        + trying to explain to others what they have learned

All are experiencing that encountering God:

* not necessarily easy
* not necessarily straightforward

Powerful:

* but also confusing

St Paul in first letter to the Corinthians says:

* ‘For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.’
  + acknowledging
    - that we cannot know everything there is to know about God
      * in this life

We can all experience God

I think the doctrine of the Trinity:

* emphasises / explains that we can experience God in different way
  + we can meet God in different ways

Encountering God:

* life-changing
* transformational
  + not just because it can be so overwhelming
    - but also because it tends to be challenging
      * how can you meet God
        + and stay exactly the same?

While we can encounter God

* be changed by God
  + we can never truly know God
    - not fully
    - not in this life

Believing in God

* following God
* dedicating our lives to God
  + is about learning to live with a sense of mystery
    - accepting that we don’t know it all
    - that we cannot explain it all
    - that we cannot understand it all

All we can do is be open to God:

* be drawn in by the love that exists between the persons of the Trinity
  + grow closer to God
  + try and imitate Jesus more and more
    - but also accept that God is so much greater than we are

In the words of the blessing:

* the love of God which is above all understanding
* God who is above all understanding

All we can do is embrace mystery in our lives

* learn to love God
  + without wanting to limit God
    - leaving God space:
      * to be God
      * to surprise
      * to challenge us

Amen.