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.