

When I was a student in Cambridge in the 1970's there was a story told by students at Jesus College about Sir Alec Douglas Home, an aristocrat who had renounced his peerage to become Foreign Secretary in the Conservative government of Edward Heath a few years earlier. On one of his visits abroad a foreign bishop had asked him earnestly, "Tell me Sir Alec, do you keep in touch with Jesus?" He replied urbanely, "Well yes, as a matter of fact, I dine there once or twice a year."

My college was Trinity, a heritage I share with the great Granville Dudley Ryder, who paid for a good deal of the rebuilding of this church and whose children are commemorated in our lovely West window. I'm afraid I only dine there once every ten years when invited back for a reunion. For Christians, keeping in touch with Jesus sounds important, indeed crucial. But how do we keep in touch with the Trinity?

The word Trinity doesn't occur in the Bible but the concept of God in three persons goes right back to Genesis: God the Creator creates the heavens and the earth; his Spirit 'moves across the face of the waters'; his Voice says 'let there be light'.

All three persons are present at Jesus' baptism: God the Father, a shining light and a voice from heaven; Jesus, proclaimed as his Son; and the Spirit, descending on him in the form of a dove.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that 'no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit'.

And Paul signs off his second letter to the Corinthians with the famous blessing that we now know as the Grace: 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

So far so good, and not a mention of the Trinity! But a problem arose for the early church, in a questioning and hostile Greek/Roman environment, as they sought to define and defend the divinity of Christ. A second century theologian called Tertullian coined the word Trinity and defined the Godhead as 'three persons, one substance'. The next 150 years saw furious debates over the balance of one versus three – were they all equal, how were they distinctive? And so on. Each way of explaining this mystery was given a name, and so there arose Monarchianism, Modalism, Monophysitism – and those are just the ones beginning with 'M'! One of the most prominent was Arianism, whose proponent Arius argued that 'the Son who is tempted, suffers and dies, however exalted he may be, is not to be equal to the immutable Father beyond pain and death.'

In the year 325 the Council of Nicaea – from which we derive the Nicene Creed – stamped on this. Jesus is of one substance with the Father, he has always been one with the Father; he did not assume Divinity at his baptism or resurrection.

Now Arius has a point! We need to give proper place to Jesus' humanity, to take him out of the stained glass window, to understand that he really was a human being like us. He was tempted, he suffered, he died. But if he did that merely as a good man – or even, as a man

uniquely open to God's word and love, who came to be recognised by God as his chosen one – we are robbed of what we refer to each Christmas as 'the mystery of the Incarnation': God became man, he took on flesh, he walked alongside us, suffered with us and died with us and for us.

You may have noticed that the Nicene Creed has become a casualty of lockdown in our Communion liturgy. Keen to reduce the length of the service and make it more accessible I felt that some of the language had not travelled well from the fourth to the twenty first century:

'God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father'

These words were crucial in cementing the belief of the early church and banishing Arius and his fellow heretics to outer darkness, but I'm not sure they resonate so much with us today. And so I replaced the Nicene creed with the much simpler but still absolutely Trinitarian Creed we use instead. Nobody complained, but I'm open to discussion if you feel it should be reinstated!

The Trinity helps us to debunk some bad notions of God. He is not the old man with a beard sitting on a cloud. He is not the distant creator, the watchmaker who set the world in motion and then stood back to observe. His work of creation is constant, unfinished, groaning (to quote St Paul) as it awaits the final consummation of the kingdom. He is God among us and within us, the 'ground of our being' in the words of theologian Paul Tillich. Neither is Jesus merely a good man or a prophet: he was and is God's Son, an indivisible part of God himself, through whose life, death and resurrection God demonstrated that he had overcome death, pain, sin and cruelty by taking them all on himself and defeating them, once and forever. And the Holy Spirit isn't some second rate messenger, sent from heaven because the Father and the Son are too busy. He is the breath of God himself, moving in our lives as he first moved to create the world.

So how do we keep in touch with the Trinity?

By acknowledging God's creative love, honouring and protecting the world he created for us to live in

By claiming eternal life through the gift of his Son, who challenged our selfishness and greed and taught us how to live

By being reborn in the Holy Spirit who can guide us and inspire us