St Andrews, St Andrews 310515 Trinity Sunday

And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

That is a soundbite from the Athanasian Creed – sometimes used on Trinity Sunday. Its complex language – once described as ‘impenetrable thickets’ – summon up the mystery of what it means to say that God is three in one and one in three – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Apart from anything else, it illustrates just one of the delemmas of what it means to proclaim and to teach the faith in our times. Our age expects speech direct and simple. It expects clarity of understanding and of exposition. It expects a simple answer to the difficult question, ‘What am I supposed to believe?’ But the great sweep of the history of faith reminds us that like Isaiah we stand speechless and unworthy before the majesty of God. And it is that majesty which in the end stirs in us the faith response, ‘Here am I; send me’

Jesus and Nicodemus – two teachers – meet and talk. It rapidly becomes clear that they are having one of those conversations which is well–known to many of us – a conversation in which the words sound familiar but there is no shared understanding of meaning. And yet from their conversation arises a Trinitiarian understanding of faith in its fulness. It is about the reality of God in Christ – Jesus the Son of God sent and given for the salvation of the world. And that reality is only apprehended and understood through the awakening of belief through the spirit. Those connections are everywhere in the working out of our faith – most obviously in baptism but also in the forgiveness of sins and in blessing. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus works its way towards the same conclusion in John 3:16 – ‘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’ That has to be one of the most important verses in the Bible – it must be because until recently you found it painted on the side of a barn – Authorised Version of course – on the journey from Derry/Londonderry towards Belfast.

And if I was to say why this matters – what is it about our faith in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – that makes a difference …. I would say two things

One is that it is clear that faith and believe are not simply matters of intellectual assent. It can’t simply be a left brain thing – a matter of objective reasoning. Faith must of course pass the test of not being unreasonable – because we work out our faith on the basis of scripture, tradition and reason. But faith is a dynamic thing – shaped not just in the mind but in the heart as well by the action of the Spirit. And because it is in that way dynamic, intuitive, passionate as well as reasonable, the same Holy Spirit which engenders faith is capable of stirring us to the response of vocation, ‘Here am I send me’

The other is that we should recognise God as relational – expressing in the perfection of the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit a perfection of relationship to which we aspire. That seems to me particularly important when we live in an age where the unity of our churches is constantly stressed by seemingly unresolvable dispute. I spent three days last week in Dublin at a 4 Nations Meeting on Faith and Order issues – I know – the glamour and excitement of my life is sometimes almost unsustainable. Dublin was still absorbing the outcome of the Same Sex Marriage Constitutional Referendum – where the most Catholic country in Europe voted firmly for change. As in Scotland, so in Ireland – young people became passionately politically active and it made a difference. I was glad to have the opportunity of meeting the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin – who said, ‘We need a reality check in the churches’ In ten days time, we shall address the question of whether our General Synod wishes to change our Marriage Canon to accommodate Same Sex Marriage. Trevor will be in the Chair at that point – remember him in your prayers.

If God is perfection of relationship – then we must hold one another in relationship as we make our decisions. To do this is not to prioritise unity over truth and justice. It is to seek to discern God’s will in love and grace.

So perhaps the thickets are not so impenetrable after all – the language may bend under the strain of defining indefinable mystery and majesty. But in there is a calling to spirit-shaped faith – and to loving and graceful relationship – which challenges us profoundly. May God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless us all.