

Trinity Sunday

On Friday, one of the most prominent families from our church lost a son, nephew and grandson in a car accident. He was 27.

Some people instantly feel that this sort of thing is a challenge to those who believe in God. But it's legitimate to face this challenge by wondering – which god do you mean? There are many gods, now, just as there were in the ancient church. And it's true that, when something tragic and unhappy and wrong happens, like the death of a well-loved young man aged 27, many of our currently popular gods can be tried and found wanting.

There's the god who doesn't really do religion. This god is the creator of everything – well, there's got to be something behind it all, hasn't there? Stands to reason. This god makes everything, but doesn't really care about whether you pay attention to him – he's nice for your nan to talk about, or for your youngest kids to sing about at school, but he's not especially interesting for you – well, you've not really thought about him much. You might turn to this god when something terrible happens and say “Why god? Why me?” And do you know what? That god's pretty inadequate in those circumstances. And even though you didn't really care about him in the first place – you can feel justified in getting rid of him now. I used to believe in god, you might say. But now I can't – not after what's happened.

Then there's the slightly more religious god, the god who saved so-and-so's father down the road, when he got cancer and everyone prayed and he went into remission. That god – a very popular god – looks pretty inadequate when things go wrong. It seems that that god rewards some for their bravery and not others. He's a god whose judgement appears to be random, if not actually faulty. Turn to him when something goes right, and this god is wonderful, gives you a lovely warm feeling of how he supports you through your life. Turn to him when something goes wrong, and you can really end up hating him. He's like the sort of parent who sometimes kisses you good night, and sometimes beats you up. In the end, the kisses mean nothing. This – slightly more religious god – is definitely wanting.

Then there's the really-quite-religious-actually god, the god with whom you have a “personal relationship”. This god exists only for you, he loves only you, he saves only you; all the worship of him is couched in terms of you and I. No-one else matters. I really want to praise you, you love me and you save me, you lift me up, and I praise your name. There are so many hymns to this god – some of them very beautiful hymns indeed. You can spend your whole life in a holy huddle with this sort of god; and still get a kick in the teeth. What was your purpose, god, in taking my son, my nephew, my grandson? What were you about there, Lord, when I told you I loved you and I heard you say you loved me, over and over again?

For these gods, like most of the gods of our world, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in any of these gods. I don't believe they exist, and I don't believe it's very helpful to pretend they exist. Lots of people who claim to be atheists – especially important or famous people – are atheists concerning these gods. They think they're challenging me and Christians like me; but all we can say is – I don't believe in him either.

The God I believe in is the God we celebrate today, on Trinity Sunday. The doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes seen as a sort of game we can play – a game like Just a Minute, where the point is to be very clever and avoid certain intellectual pitfalls. So you might think that the doctrine of the trinity is about trying to show how three persons can be one God, “neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance, as the old catechism has it”. Theological nerds love Trinity Sunday. But the Trinity is more serious than this.

The Trinity is a display of who God is – he is a God who works. He’s not a smiley and nice distant relative who when you really need him will let you down; he’s not a capricious domestic bully, being kind one minute and violent the next; he’s not your own personal “Best Friend Forever” who turns out not to love you after all. This God is a God at war with chaos and nihilism and death; a God who creates this world free to be threatened by death and asks the world to choose life; who then battles those forces of chaos and darkness through the work of first, the Son Jesus Christ, and second, the Holy Spirit. This God cares about justice, about mercy and forgiveness, who wants life in all its fullness for all his people, not just a chosen few. That is the God proclaimed in St Peter’s over many hundreds of years, and when we say “In the name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit” we’re not undergoing some box-ticking theological exercise, dotting the ‘i’s and crossing the ‘t’s, we’re proclaiming our God, the God who works against and hates death and sin, and the record of whose work can be read in the Bible. This is the God whose work we want, at St Peter’s, to share in; this is the God whose house we want this church to be – recognizably, obviously, explicitly. This is the God who, through the work of Creation, through the work of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, sight to the blind, and liberation for those who are oppressed.

In the name of that God – in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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