

Sunday 27th May 2018
Trinity Sunday (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Isaiah 6.1-8

NT: Romans 8.12-17

G: John 3.1-17

We are surrounded by numbers all the time, and within Christianity you will find the numbers three and seven cropping up rather a lot: seven deadly sins; seven churches in Asia; seven fruits of the spirit; three main patriarchs in the Old Testament, Jonah was inside the whale for three days, Jesus was tempted by the devil three times. You get the general idea... And the numbers resonate in our everyday life as well.

There are seven days in a week, and seven dwarves; there is a 'Three Choirs Festival', and of course there are only three significant football teams, I am told: Liverpool, Everton, and Tranmere Rovers.

When I arrived in Liverpool the then Archdeacon of Liverpool told me that if you move to Liverpool you have to decide very quickly whether you are a red or a blue... unless, of course, you are the Rector of Liverpool, in which case you are far too grand for that sort of thing.

Now, I cannot preach a sermon about football, because some of you are depressed about last night's result, and some of you are pretending not to be bothered, but are quietly disappointed. But it is true that Liverpool and Everton is a rivalry, whereas Liverpool, Everton and Tranmere is a community. Put the three together, and – whatever team you might support – you aren't that bothered about rivalry, because it becomes a shared interest. To be honest, it is Tranmere Rovers which takes the heat out of it all. When did they last win anything important?

This is not just contextual casuistry, but rather a significant point: the number two is competitive; the number three is familial. Those of you who have been coming to church for a long time will hopefully have heard many learned sermons on Trinity Sunday about the magisterial magnificence of the threefold Godhead. The Athanasian Creed, which may or may not have anything to do with the third-century Athanasius of Alexandria, begins with some elucidating words: "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence." This all remains doctrinally

relevant, but probably less relevant to those still thinking about last night's football match. What is more relevant for football fans is where you watched the match. Was it on your own? Well, that must have been a bit dull. Are you short of friends at the moment? Was it with a friend? Great – but that might have been a bit intense, and how did you feel when one of you went out to the fridge for another drink? Or was it with a crowd? I wrote this sermon whilst sitting in my study at home with the garden doors open, and the air was punctuated by noise every time something happened, whether it was a player retiring with an injured shoulder, or the ball getting close to a goal.

Trinity Sunday is a great Festival for the Church, but it is not abounding in relevance if we use it to think about doctrine. Its relevance is if we are able to understand more about ourselves. Trinity is community, and God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is a model for hospitality, respect and love. Each person of the Trinity is indivisible from the others because of their sacrifice of identity and individuality to the whole, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness as Three Persons. If you think this is complicated, then it is because it is a mystery. But we can understand it if we start with what we know. The sacrificial nature of love is at the heart of this: in love we remain who we are, but we give up something of ourselves. Because I love another, I make myself vulnerable, and I sacrifice some of my autonomy because I care for another. This is not just about personal relationships, but also about how we give ourselves to the world around us. Every dry throat we experience as we watch a child dragged from a bombsite in Syria is an act of love. Amongst all the doctrinal words we might use about the Trinity – community, perichoresis, consubstantial, coeternal, and that sort of thing – we also need to cling on to the fact that this is relevant to us now... today.

The Holy Trinity is our understanding of God, and so it is the framework by which we live. It is who we are. The Holy Trinity shows us the distinctiveness of the individual: the Father is not the Son who is not the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Trinity shows us the unity of all creation: my humanity is one which is shared by you and by you and by you and by our brothers and sisters across the world, all expressed in the mutual responsibility we share for each other. Remarkably, even the taxation system is an

expression of unity, as we willingly accept the burden of responsibility towards the common life. This is how we live.

But if the Trinity is a model for who we are, for what we are already doing, then it can as well be model for what we should be doing. Doctrine is useless if it has no application. And the Trinity shows us that ignoring the people with whom we are interconnected actually detracts from who we are. To those who say there is no such thing as society but only individual men and women and families, the Trinity shows us that we cannot use the word 'individual' to define ourselves, unless we *also* use the word 'society'. They are inseparable, because our identity is in relationship. This is the theme which runs throughout human understanding, both Christian and non-Christian. We have John Donne in the 16th century saying "No man is an island," and the secular philosopher Martin Heidegger in the 20th century naming the individual not as Mensch – the German for 'person' – but Dasein – which Heidegger understood as being an existential involvement with the world around us.

This perception of identity therefore tells us not *what* we should be doing, but *why* we should be doing it. It's time now to do it. Each individual and community stumbles forward in how we live together. Love, respect, care, generosity, giving. These are not formulaic words, but expressions of what reality should be. Let's replace those words with outputs: foodbanks, visiting, time, trouble, selflessness. In today's world we have come to this realization that we express our faith and our understanding not by listening to each other and reflecting, but by acting. Let me illustrate that: within the Liverpool City Region I lead on much of the inter-faith dialogue. Ten or twenty years ago, this would have been based on interaction with each other. Today, as I convene a meeting of faith leaders next month, it is based on action. The focus of our meeting is a response to homelessness: 'being' is great – 'doing' is better.

And that is the heart of the Trinity. We have spent centuries concentrating on the 'being' element of the Godhead, but now we think about 'doing'. We have reflected on what he is, on what we are; now we focus on what he does, what we do. Understanding that, through the model of Trinity, we express

our humanity by doing something about it. So that's what we are doing as a church community: we had our Christian Aid collection this month, we've got Asylum Link coming one Sunday next month, we do our Foodbank collections – there is no need for us to limit this. But as individuals as well, the Trinity is only expressed through action. Don't just 'think,' you must 'do.' This is what it means to be human.

Fr Crispin Pailing