

Trinity Sunday - John 16:12-15

10:00am Holy Communion

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

<Prayer – Trinity Sunday>

What does it mean to know something, or even to know anything? It's disturbing when we realise how much we accept without question. Thoughts such as *trust, faith and confidence* give access into our minds in ways that seem almost insecure. How is it we accept so many things, without them being 'knowledge'. There is a threatening question you can ask someone – *how do you know that?* It's not always easy to answer.

This year marks the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed, since its creation in 325. Its words are a statement of Christian faith that, almost without exception, are a regular part of our worship. **The Creed gives us a collection of things we can know about God, but by faith. Billions of Christians say it weekly, across millions of churches. Perhaps with the exception of the Lord's Prayer, the creed is the most recited text of all time.** The Creed is a test and a statement of faith which, with very minor exceptions, is a point of *unity* between all of the major Christian denominations.

In worship, we read it aloud together: **‘We believe in God.....and then we continue from there with *what* we believe about God’.**

The Creed is *doctrine* – those things we set as true and unchanging in our Christian belief system – the things we have learnt about God. Such words are thought of as sacred and holy, blessed and hallowed. All those faithful churchy words mean *for us* a *kind* of knowledge – that we can know things *by faith*. **But how much can we really know about God?**

<pause>

The most accepted way to **know anything** *is because you can experience things through your senses*. So, if something appeals to your senses then you can pick up some knowledge about it. Here we are in the summer season, so if you have roses in your garden, then you can sense that they are lovely things by their visual appearance and perfume. Maybe you can learn even more about roses through other sensations, like being pricked by its thorns, or by their need to be cultivated by feeding or watering. Most of us could get to the stage, where we have *enough* knowledge – being able to basically plant them and care for them.

And perhaps that is all you will ever need to know about roses, even for the whole of your life. Yet, you could go further still.

How about knowledge of when and how to take cuttings to propagate, or when pruning to encourage growth, even addressing common rose diseases and parasites. **But how much knowledge do you need of roses to say you really *know* about them, and when could you say that you know enough or even that you know *everything*?** Now think about that shape of knowledge in terms of knowing God, and faith. Are there any God experts here?

<pause>

In the year 306 **Flavius Valerius Constantinus**, was hailed as an emperor in York, into what was a complicated situation of rulers at that time - there might have been four or five *Emperors* across the empire. Over his 29-year rule, he would battle to unite the empire, which would eventually earn him the popular title of Constantine the Great.

It was during his reign, that Constantine would find reason to call upon God's providence and protection in that civil war. When marching upon Rome with his army in 312, Constantine saw **a vision of the cross in the sky**, accompanied by the words '*in this sign you shall conquer.*' That was taken as a sure sign of divine presence, and in that faith, Constantine would prevail **with his life and empire owed to God**. Within a year he would preside over a declaration that is since remembered as the Edict of Milan. That edict granted religious liberty to all Christians, after what had been many years of persecution against them.

Driven by the compelling stories of Jesus's life in the gospels, and by God's Holy Spirit, the Church had grown in all directions during those early centuries. Yet, as has so often been the case in Christian history, the very widespread reach of the Church had also given rise to a wide spread of *theological understanding*, over essential matters of believe. **These were the big questions about how Christianity made sense**. Learned people in those times were educated through such disciplines as philosophy, rhetoric, logic and mathematics. Think of Plato, Aristotle, Euclid or Pythagoras. As people turned to Christ, it was no surprise that they would want to understand their faith through the academy of the day – and that brought difficult questions.

But the Christian faith has never been afraid of such examination; indeed, the Christian faith has never been incompatible with knowledge and truth.

Since the very first church, there had been disunity over key parts of the faith, most especially how Jesus Christ (the Son) related to God (the Father), and to all other people. In our faith we find it easy to claim such incredible things like: *‘God sent his son Jesus Christ to die for our sins, that we might be forgiven and inherit eternal life.’* That is quite a big statement to make, when you think about it. So different groups claimed orthodoxy according to different formulas of belief, whilst accusing others of being *heretics*. There was division in the early church, and it would stay that way for over two centuries. When Emperor Constantine established the Christian faith as normal of empire, he wanted the church to be peaceful and united, just as he had untied the empire. This is why Constantine called the great Council of Nicaea, where there would be much debate to establish one creed, as we have it today.

<pause>

Today is Trinity Sunday, reminding us of the most important truth of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – the three in one and one in three.

<Creed - find it in the order of service>

- **Is there one God or may Gods?** So what then is the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How does that continue or contradict the assertion of the one Almighty God, against the polytheism of the pagans?
- **Was Christ created** at will, like any Father and Son? Is Christ therefore subordinate to God? Does that mean Christ is not

fully God, and therefore not applicable in his life, death resurrection to all of creation?

- **Was Christ human flesh or just a spirit?** Was he a man called and adopted by God, like a prophet? So is Christ not actually God's own flesh and blood then? Not God's son?
- **Or how can Christ be human, yet sinless?** No one else was. How can the corruption of flesh exist alongside the perfection of divinity, yet in the same person?
- At the resurrection, **did Jesus rise in flesh or only as spirit?** So, can our flesh rise again in the resurrection?
- These were the big questions of what we believe – just try answering any of them!

The creed was aimed to produce universal agreement **but can never claim to be universal understanding.** There must be room for the mystery of faith, for the unknowable mind of God.

So, is the Church weakened by not having full knowledge and understanding of these things. No, because otherwise it would be not be faith. In the creed we have *enough* knowledge to have faith in God, or better to say, we have a *sufficient* knowledge of God to have relationship with him. **But can you seek to know God more?** Yes, you can. God responds to our seeking of Him by revealing himself to us when we ask. That is a very spiritual thing – we can pray '*Lord God reveal even more of your truth and glory to me*'. We could also study God in a more cerebral and academic way – that is the pursuit of theology. I do a very great deal of that, as I try to understand how God relates to life and society in all its wonders and traumas.

Faith in God *is* knowledge, indeed it is the greatest knowledge one can seek, but it's pursuit is a *journey of faith*. This is a knowledge which is *transforming*, not just educating.

With your *enough* knowledge or even *expert* knowledge of Roses, would you then be occupied with them every day, and your life changed towards making all else secondary? Probably not - you would have to be a bit strange to be so narrow minded. **There are not that many kinds of knowledge that will really change you (not just making you happy in your leisure).** But knowledge of God *is* able to transform us, even within the limit understanding of faith. That is what we mean when we talk about the *glorious mystery* of God. At Pentecost, last week, God's Holy Spirit entered in, to give a sensation of faith and knowledge of Christ: '[When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said, 'he will take what is mine and declare it to you.'](#)

The Nicene Creed is not exact, it's not exhaustive, and it's not easily understandable. **In relation to it, we must have faith, and in result of it we shall find our faith and unity confirmed, as we say it together.** The Nicene creed does not stand the precise test of academic knowledge, but it does define the boundary of human knowledge and our arrogance to claim it. **The Creed is the most we can know about God, and probably the most we should ever try to know about God. Let it be just faith.**

<Let's stand and say the creed together.>

Amen