

By this time in my tenure, you've heard pretty much every sermon I have several times over, in fact that was probably the case by my third week here and these ensuing years of climbing into the pulpit have been merely exercises in repeating exactly the same thing in ever more rococo and then desperate variations. I'm not sure I've got anything more to say. But then again, that was the case in week 3-remember then?

So. My saying the same thing over and over is not because of lack of imagination nor ennui: rather the address is one size fits all because Christianity is a religion of very little. It's infinitely reducible and is always subject to shrinkflation- less content for the same faith cost. Push it enough and you can reduce what we believe to one word 'Jesus'. One word! Could this be my shortest sermon ever? You should coco.

I thought this morning, with just a few more words I could boot out the baroque and go back to basics, I mean really back to basics and give you 'our faith in a nutshell', a wizened version of the highly concentrated catechism confirmation candidates receive (alongside a stodgy chunk of alliteration).

So three bullet points for our Trinitarian faith.

1) What we believe about God.

God is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God created the universe and everything and everybody in it. God loves what he made so much he entered into his creation incarnate as Jesus. He died for us and was resurrected, offering us eternal life with him. Executive summary: God is love.

2) What we believe about each other:.

We are Christ's brothers and sisters, all God's children and all (potentially, probably) destined for heaven.

3) What we should do:

Love God and love our neighbour. Do unto others as we would have them do to us.

And erm, that's all folks.

Not that I'm going to stop there of course. Without doubt some of you would be delighted if I ended there; equally some might feel short changed if I just grind to a halt.

So, I'm going to continue just a little bit further and ask, if that's what we believe about God, how do we know that? How do we know about God? The answer is that what we know about God is what he chooses for us to know, what he chooses to reveal of himself to us. We can't find him off our own bat. What then are the sources of that revelation, where we do we go to know what God is telling us of himself? How does God reveal himself to us? The answer to that question will teach us much about our faith. If you know all that follows, you have permission to feel smug; if you didn't, then if you look smug nobody will know any different.

How do we know what we know about God? If you're a Christian from a church that traces at least part of its ancestry to the Protestant Reformation you're almost certain to answer that question with 'The Bible'. How do we know about God? The Bible. It's obvious isn't it? It's the first thing that comes into your mind. The good book. The Gospel truth. The word of the Lord.

True, the Bible is a special resource for Christians. It tells us about God in a unique way, but as a source of revelation it's not without its problems. Very often you'll hear someone say 'The Bible says...' but this isn't strictly speaking true, The Bible does not, can not 'say' anything except in the same ways as a ventriloquist's doll says things. For the scriptures to speak, somebody has to speak through them: more succinctly the Bible is always interpreted by the reader. This gives lie to the assertion that it has a plain meaning or indeed a literal one and coincidentally explains why there are more varieties of Protestant Christianity than there are late Thameslink trains.

In the 16th century Reformers clamoured for the Bible to be translated from Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic (God's word has always been polyglot) into the everyday language that real, living, everyday people spoke and understood. Let the Bible speak in words the people will understand. Sounds good to me (and yes there is a New Testament in the Yorkshire dialect). Once the scriptures had been put into the vernacular, people took to their Bible study with alacrity. They loved it, they couldn't get enough of their Bible in English, French, German, whatever native tongue it was they spoke. Round one to the Reformers. Then, an unforeseen and unwanted problem reared its head. What happened was that people would read the Bible and come to all sorts of conclusions religious leaders didn't want them to. The

Reformers soon discovered that far from having a 'plain sense' scripture has as many senses as it has readers. People would read their Bibles and see support for communal ownership and cutting off the king's head. People would read their Bibles and hear it telling them to abolish Bishops. People would do things like read their Bibles and- horror of horror- become Baptists. If each of us is our own interpreter of what we read, can we all be right? No we can't, so important though the Bible is, we need to balance it with other approaches. Such as tradition. Tradition in this context doesn't mean something like 'what we've always believed.' Tradition means something like things that are not in the Bible combined with the wisdom of crowds. Tradition will tell us that God's self-revelation didn't end when the last word of the Bible was written, nor did it start when the first word was written. Before and after the Bible was written people have come close to God in prayer, they have been granted visions and understandings, people have mulled and pondered, fine-tuned and finessed. Tradition decided what was scripture and what wasn't; tradition tells us of the saints; tradition, paradoxically enough, gave us the Reformation. Taking tradition on board means that you never have to be a single person reading the Bible and interpreting it afresh: you can draw on the wisdom of all the other Christians who have heard, read, interpreted and understood through the centuries, a wisdom of a crowd that traverses time and space, cultures and languages. So add tradition to the mix and we may deal with the problems that may come if everybody interprets the Bible their own way, but of course we add other problems to the mix.

As anyone who has been caught up in a riot will know, crowds are not always wise or safe places. It's perfectly possible for a lot of people to be simultaneously wrong in the same way, 52 or 48 percent, for example, take your pick. In theory tradition changes when new knowledge and perspectives emerge, but humans aren't always like that. We cling doggedly to old ways and understandings, particularly if we have ascribed those understandings to the divine. Overemphasising tradition can also mean religious cliques and castes, which tell us next to nothing about God, but lots about humans.

So, the Bible is good, but has its problems. Tradition is good, but has its problems. Happily God also gave us brains and one of the side effects of the human brain is intellectual capacity, which means we all come ready fitted with the ability to reason. When we come to think about God, to try to understand what he is revealing about himself to us through the scriptures and tradition we can use our reason to sift and to sort, to clarify and calibrate. So with reason we can understand sacred writing and tradition in their context, we can start to sift the plump grains of faith from the

dusty chaff of time and culture and see what God is saying to us right here, right now rather than what God was saying to bronze age shepherds or mediaeval monks. Needless to say, reason has its limitations too: reasoned faith can be dry and intellectual, a creed of love with no heart. It's perfectly possible to reason God entirely out of the equation, and equally to use human logic to arrive at a conclusion which gives us something it's extremely hard to recognise as God. Just speak to a Calvinist.

Which brings us to our last source of revelation, experience. Sometimes what we know about God isn't there in the Bible, it isn't something anyone else has noticed before us, isn't something we have reasoned, it's something we've known by our experience. Perhaps the most well known example of this was John Wesley, founder of Methodism. An Anglican clergyman- so steeped in Scripture, tradition and reason- he was on the verge of losing his faith when he felt his heart strangely warmed at Moravian church service and suddenly knew he knew God. Experience of God can be a very powerful source of revelation, but of course it has its downsides too. Over-relying on experience can end up with us making a god of our emotions and subjectivity: it's very, even unhelpfully individualistic.

If you haven't worked it out yet, here is perhaps the place for me to point out that experience is not the final piece of the puzzle that makes everything click into place. There's no such thing. It's always going to be a bit of a mess, ragged at the edges, with loose ends and unravelling knots, bulging in odd places and leaking like mad. That's because we're trying to understand, trying to describe something- God- that we are entirely incapable of understanding, describing or comprehending. Which brings me, finally, to the ultimate paradox of faith: until we see him face to face we can only ever know in part, only ever see as in a mirror dimly. The one thing we can truly know about God is how much we cannot know about God. If we can make peace with our incomprehension, then we will be beginning to know God.