**Sermon for Stowe 26th May 2024**

9.45pm

Pray.

I used to be quite good at fixing things when we had old cars. We had a series of Triumph Heralds (remember them?) and we – both of us - got to be dab hands at replacing the differential on the back axle with a new one (well, second hand from a scrap yard). Or if there was a problem with the engine I could usually diagnose it, lift the bonnet (or in the case of a Triumph Herald, pivot it forwards) and either clean the spark plugs or replace the points or whatever.

Nowadays I look under our bonnet and – well, I don’t recognise a thing. To start with, it’s got a hybrid engine. It’s all computer controlled, and anyone who fixes cars these days always brings not their toolbox but their laptop with them. I’m hopeless, only going under there to fill up the screen wash.

And yet – the car goes. It always gets us from A to B. Perhaps I don’t need to know ***how*** it works, but only have faith that it ***will***. And it does. I just get in and trust it.

Today is Trinity Sunday. You’ve no doubt heard about the Trinity. Three in one. One God in Three persons. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Three but one. Hmmm.

Hands up those who understand the Trinity? In the same way that I don’t know how a car works, I don‘t fully understand the Trinity. But perhaps I don’t need to fully understand it, only trust in this Triune God. Just as I believe enough in our car to get in and drive it, so I believe in the Trinity, even though I don’t completely comprehend it.

Why do we celebrate the Trinity particularly today? We’ve just celebrated Pentecost, the wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And last Sunday evening we enjoyed an evening of baptisms in BPC church. In one sense that is our aim, our end, as a church, to see people come to faith and be baptised. On the other hand, for the ones baptised, it is just the beginning of a life-long journey with Jesus.

Remember, Jesus’ last words on earth included this: ‘…go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’ The disciples knew about Jesus because they’d just spent three years alongside him. They knew the Father, perhaps less well, mostly learned from being with Jesus. The Spirit they were less sure about: that is until Pentecost, when they had a first-hand lesson they could never forget. So by then they knew something of the Trinity.

Though the concept of the Trinity is not an easy one, there are a number of illustrations I’ve heard which seek to explain it, though all fall short. See how there grab you.

One is the egg. Shell, yolk, white. Three constituent parts but one egg.

Another: ice, water, steam. Three forms of the same element.

Others include the clover leaf (or shamrock for the Irish among us) and three musical notes making a chord.

One of my favourite analogies is the electric bar fire. You can see the bar red-hot – that represents the visible Jesus. You can feel (but not see) the heat – the Holy Spirit. And there is electric power connected invisibly to make it work – that is God the Father. It is a single fire but with three constituent parts.

I hope one of these will help you. But in the end there is no analogy or parable or illustration which does it full justice.

Last week I think Max Wigley was here. Today is Trinity Sunday, for which the lectionary reading is John 3: 1-7. But Max spoke on that last week – by the way, he did ask me first!

So I have taken an alternative gospel reading, from John 16, where Jesus is talking to the twelve in the Upper room, at their last evening together. He has so much to tell them but he knows they can’t receive it all at once – they are simply not ready. In fact, Jesus did tell them a whole lot of things which I think sailed right over their heads at the time - but with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost it all began to fit together and make sense.

When Joseph of Arimathea offered his family burial vault for the body of Jesus, imagine the conversation with his wife.

‘You’ve what? Given away the family tomb? But that’s where I’ll be buried, that’s where you’ll be buried! What on earth were you thinking?’

Joseph replied, ‘Ah yes, but he said he only needed it for the weekend.’

And so it proved. Jesus was right all along. His disciples were mostly bemused, confused, didn’t have a clue. He’d earlier told them plainly, ‘The Son of Man must die, and on the third day he will rise again.’

But that might as well have been Greek to them. Actually it could have been Greek, though probably Aramaic. But either way, they didn’t get it.

But when Pentecost came, that great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, everything changed. Take Peter, for instance. The man who had denied his best friend, and again, and again, then crawled away into a hole in abject shame – this same Peter stood up and preached the sermon of a lifetime, and notched up 3000 converts. Wow!

That’s the power of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus. But the same Spirit has been at work in the world not only ever since Pentecost but in fact ever since – ever! He was there at creation. And he’s still here now.

Going back for a moment to cars, and having said our cars have always got us to where we wanted to go, we were in Tesco car park a few months ago. We’d finished the shopping and were about to go home, put the shopping away and go to the Wednesday service here at 10. And my magic press-button key didn’t work. Susan’s key didn’t work either. We could get in the car using the mechanical key but then the car behaved very oddly, turning itself off and on again, and it wouldn’t start. I lifted the bonnet more in hope than expectation. Hmmm. What to do? Dunno. I know! Ring the RAC.

They were very good. In less than 40 minutes Russell turned up and almost immediately diagnosed the problem. ‘It’s your battery.’ This is a hybrid Toyota, so I knew it had a big powerful battery for the electric half of the engine. Oh-oh, this sounds expensive.

‘No, not that battery, the one in the boot.’

What? What battery in the boot? I didn’t know there was another one.

The other battery, the one that keeps everything else running.

Oh, that one. Yes, that one was dead. Apparently.

So Russell rang round all the places who sell batteries. No one had one like ours. ‘It’s an unusual one…’ The words you don’t want to hear.

But Russell went the extra mile, bless him. He wasn’t due to be on shift tomorrow until 11 but he said he would arrange with his supervisor that he would start at 9 instead, and get the right battery from a dealer he knows near where he lives. Yes, he had eventually found the exact match. Whew.

He managed to get the car started at Tesco using an external battery pack, and he followed us home to make sure we got there safely.

And true to his word he turned up soon after 10 and fixed the car. Hooray. Thanks Russell.

Why am I telling you this?

The point is this. Sometimes we don’t understand what’s going on and we need help. The Trinity is a difficult concept. We don’t understand it all. It’s no good opening the bonnet and staring at what’s there – you’ll never sort it on your own. Especially when the problem isn’t under the bonnet, it’s in the boot!

The lesson for us is we can’t live this life entirely on our own. We’re not designed to be solitary – we’re made to live in community. We need each other. Even God himself is Three-in-one – living in community, as it were – and the same is true of us.

I have spent a lifetime with computers and I now try to help others with their computer problems. Russell obviously enjoys helping people with their cars, especially those who don’t have a clue. Like me. But to get Russell to help me, I had to admit I couldn’t fix it myself and I needed help. And I had to call him.

I still don’t know fully how a hybrid car works. But I now know it has another battery in the boot, so I’ve made some progress! All because I swallowed my pride and asked for help. I know I can’t fix it myself, but I know a man who can. (Oh sorry, that’s the AA advert.)

Here’s something that struck me some time ago in a book by Joe Church, whose family actually founded Governor’s Camp in the Masai Mara in Kenya where we were lucky enough to stay some years ago. This is what Joe Church wrote about the Holy Spirit.

‘The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He shares in Creation. He is likened to the wind, fire and water. He inspires people to build, to plan, to make beautiful things; to speak, to laugh and to sing, and to make music. He gives courage, bravery, leadership, and fearless testimony. He gives visions, dreams and divine revelations. He gives people respect, caring, courtesy and love. He gives true fear of God, and understanding of the blood of Christ as God’s remedy for sin, and can unveil the future and make us seers and prophets. He helps us to pray, and to intercede with God. He helps us to bow our stubborn wills, to repent, to humble ourselves, to yield and to be set free. And lastly he wakens, he revives, he gives the burning heart and he lights up the faces of men and women to be truly Christlike.’

Let’s pray we know and experience the power of the Spirit more and more in our lives.

One final thought. I think sometimes we’re not willing to share our own faith because we don’t understand enough, we don’t know enough, about the Christian life, as we’ve been saying. And I get that. But just like you can drive a car without knowing how it works, you might tell others about your car without knowing much about it.

What you can tell others about is your own experience of meeting God, how it made you feel, what effect it has had on you, what is different, then and now. That kind of testimony is far more powerful than trying to explain the Trinity. And probably more effective. And more fun!

And – thinking of doors – you may find yourself pushing at an open door and the person you’ve been talking to is more ready to listen than you thought. Most of us are not extroverts, and are not particularly eager to talk to others about our faith. But the Holy Spirit is already preparing the way for us before we even open our mouths, so that our faith-story will get a fair hearing and maybe even a positive response.

So get in that car and drive!