

Written by Reverend Dr Joanna Collicutt

Trinity Sunday 2023

I've just been on holiday with my grandsons and their parents. We spent a week in a house on the Kent coast and, despite the rather chilly and breezy weather, we had a lovely time. It was great to get to know each of the boys a bit better as individuals. This was especially true of the youngest, who was born shortly before the start of the pandemic, with the result that we don't know him as well as we should.

I discovered something he and I have in common – we are both afraid of spiders. I overheard him asking his mother in a timid voice, 'they can't fly can they?' – what a thought – but she was able to reassure him that they could not.

My aversion to spiders shows itself when I am preparing salad. If I catch sight of what seems to be a large multi-legged creature out of the corner of my eye I jump, my heart skips a beat and I feel a sudden twinge of fear and disgust. Then I look again and, nine times out of ten, realise with a sense of relief, that it is just the top of a tomato that's one of the salad ingredients.

This sequence of doing first, feeling second, and thinking last can be found in many aspects of our lives. It is due in part to the different brain systems that deal with doing, feeling, and thinking. Doing is a rapid-response system; reflective thinking is much more leisurely because it needs to take a lot of information into account – 'does that thing that might be a spider actually have eight legs?', 'does it move of its own volition?' are questions that take longer to answer than it does to jump back. Feeling comes somewhere in between doing and thinking; some aspects are quite fast and others are slow to build.

I was once explaining this to Elizabeth Thomson and she became rather excited; she began talking about John Webster's play 'The Duchess of Malfi.' There's a famous line from Act 4 scene 2 'Cover her face. Mine eyes

dazzle. She died young.' Elizabeth pointed out that here too we find the sequence of doing 'cover her face', then feeling 'mine eyes dazzle', and finally reflective thinking 'she died young'.

It's helpful to keep this sequence in mind when we think about the way the early church came up with its foundational doctrines. The idea of the Trinity that we celebrate this Sunday didn't simply drop out of the sky; it isn't like the Ten Commandments that were given directly from God written on tablets of stone. It's the product of many years reflective thinking. And before the thinking there was doing and feeling.

When people met Jesus of Nazareth they often had a strong rapid-response. For example, Luke tells us that when Peter first met Jesus and experienced something of his power in a miraculous catch of fish,

he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Peter didn't know who Jesus was – he hadn't had time to reflect on that. But his instinct was to kneel down and to ask him to get away from him. In the Gospels we quite often hear Jesus telling people to get up, and the reason is that they too had this instinct to fall at his feet.

In the early years after the resurrection it seems that people instinctively responded to their experience of Jesus in a way similar to Peter, though generally with less fear. You'll remember that Paul fell to his feet on the Road to Damascus and addressed Jesus as Lord. Jesus was also often referred to as God's servant. He was always spoken of with the greatest respect.

But something more was happening. The first Christians found that they were praying not just in the name of Jesus but TO Jesus himself. It seemed a very natural thing to do. And as they prayed, they experienced feelings – devotion and love. They were doing and then they were feeling.

Finally they began to think and realised that there was a problem. They were, for the most part, Jews, and they knew the first two commandments:

I am *Adonai* your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

And yet they were bowing down and worshipping a human being – Jesus of Nazareth. The thinking needed to catch up, and it took about three hundred years to do so, when at the council of Nicaea a form of words was constructed to make sense of what Christians had been doing and feeling for many years. It was agreed that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. That form of words is the Nicene creed – which we say most Sundays in our worship.

This was a long time after the New Testament had been written. In the New Testament we only get hints at the ideas in the Nicene creed. The exception is John's Gospel which itself claims to be written after a long period of deep reflection informed by the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, when Peter first met Jesus he called him Lord, which just means 'master'. But by the end of John's Gospel, Thomas is able to say, 'My Lord and my God'. The thinking had begun.

Something similar was going on with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. People who had never met the earthly Jesus kept encountering him long after the resurrection appearances had stopped. In fact Paul was one of these. He seemed to know Jesus really well, but he

had never actually met him. He was doing - talking to Jesus listening to his guidance, and obeying it; he was feeling – experiencing the love of Jesus, and the power of Jesus as realities in his life.

Yet Jesus no longer walked this earth; so the thinking needed to catch up. And the way that this happened was a rediscovery of something that had been there in Judaism all along: the idea of the Spirit of God – the one who brooded over the face of the waters at creation. Without developing a fully articulated doctrine of the Trinity, Paul just did the maths. He understood that God had been at work in a unique historic way in and through Jesus' life, death and resurrection; as a Jew he understood the Holy Spirit to be the most important way that God was at work in the world. And he came to understand that these three – *Adonai* the God of his ancestors, Jesus the perfect human being, and the Holy Spirit who filled his heart, were somehow one. This was the best explanation of his lived experience and the lived experience of the church.

Paul doesn't teach much about this – he had a lot of other things to be getting on with, but we can tell that he almost took this threefold reality for granted by some of his throwaway remarks. Perhaps the most famous of these is this morning's short first reading – Paul final sign-off from the second letter to the Corinthians, in which feelings finally trump both doing and thinking:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

This is perhaps all we really need to know about the Trinity: God loves us; this love is offered to us freely through the person and work of Jesus; and God is always with us as individuals and communities through the Spirit.