

TRINITY SUNDAY

J. B. Phillips, the well known Bible translator once wrote a book called 'Your God is too Small'. The gist of that book was a warning to religious people always to be on the lookout for a natural tendency which we all have to identify God with the limited products of our own minds and feelings; as if God were no more than what we personally are able to imagine, think or feel. Of course it is more comfortable to confine God to our own capacities than to have our minds stretched and worried by wider horizons and fresh thinking.

On this great festival of Trinity Sunday we are encouraged to think of God in terms of the formula Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to give honour and praise to God in majesty as we recall the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

But the very fact that we have the doctrine of the Holy Trinity so firmly embedded in the history of the church, so unchanging, so permanent; we tend to deceive ourselves into thinking that we have got God wrapped up. We think we know how to describe God in a neat and concise way - and therein lies the danger. We have lost the sense of mystery and wonder which Isaiah described in the opening sentences of his sixth chapter; 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' His vision of God was completely overwhelming - his response to God was one of lostness and unworthiness. We, with our liturgies and our church structures and our canon laws, give the impression to others and to ourselves that we have got it right - we have God under our control.

The leader article in this week's Church Times highlights this Small God thinking, to a high degree.

The Primate of the Anglican Church in the USA, the most Revd. Frank Griswold, is refusing to comment on reports that he received communion at a Roman Catholic church in Manhattan.'

It appears that the Bishop was seen, dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, among the communicants at St. Agnes' church in New York.

The very fact that the Church Times felt it necessary to report such a trivial incident fills me with despair. The fact that the divisions within the church are still so deep that intercommunion is still not allowed between the main-stream denominations of the church, convinces me that our God is certainly far too small. The unbelieving world outside the church must be convinced that we are all nuts - but really they are not even interested in our feeble bickerings.

Our approach to questions of christian unity are unbelievably restricted and narrow. We need to remind ourselves constantly that in the order of our theological thinking the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, the reign of God over the whole of his creation, takes precedence over our doctrine of the church. If we have a high doctrine of the church - if we place a high priority on the rules and regulations of our institutions - fine, so be it, but let us always remember that our doctrine of the Kingdom of God must be even higher. There is a provisional character, not only about divided churches, but about the church itself. Even if the world wide Christian Church were to be united, it would still not be the Kingdom of God. The teaching of Jesus is never about the church - it is always about the kingdom of God. Even a united church would still pray 'Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven' because the church is destined to become the kingdom ultimately. An obvious way of expressing this and embodying it, is to put our moves towards church unity in a context of grace, emphasizing grace as our acceptance of each other as we are - unqualifiedly as we are - as a response to God's acceptance of us as we are.

Furthermore, as the Christians of the third world are reminding us constantly, there are much more pressing demands on the church to live out unity, not only in terms of a doctrine of ministry and sacrament, but in terms of witness to the intolerable and blasphemous divisions between the powerful and the weak, the rich and the poor, the priveleged and the deprived.

We simply cannot afford to waste the time and energy of the church on ecclesiastical nicities when the words of our Lord come thundering down the ages challenging us to care for the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the homeless, the stranger and those in prison. We all will face that judgement eventually - 'Come, you whom my father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.'

'In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.' (Matt. 25).

AMEN

