In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is never easy talking about the Trinity. It is sometimes said that Trinity Sunday is a good Sunday to invite the Bishop to preach, but for clergy and Readers that is not generally an option. In my teaching days when required to talk about the Trinity I used all sorts of devices and examples with my students. Together, we explored the image of an equilateral triangle, the features of a shamrock, the plant with three parts used by St. Patrick, or if one was in a more scientific frame of mind considered the different forms of water: ice, water and steam. None of these and others I used were really satisfactory and invariably a bright pupil would challenge any of these images, and I was delighted when they did - a questioning student is a gift in the classroom, the best way to explore truth. Such students quite rightly could see that these examples were inadequate. I therefore gave up on various so-called bright ideas to explain the Trinity for it is a mystery and it is mystery that is at the heart of both our readings from Exodus and John’s Gospel. I do not think we should be worried that the Trinity is a mystery, but rather use this particular festival to reflect on the significance of the Trinity for our understanding of the Christian faith.

Trinity Sunday originated in England with Thomas a Becket who was consecrated Archbishop on the Sunday after Pentecost and it spread to the Western Church. All our other great festivals are celebrations of events - Trinity Sunday does not focus on a particular historical narrative, but it would not be true to say that the Trinity is not tied to an event or that it is simply a disembodied idea. The Trinitarian nature of God is actually reflected in every celebration of the Christian year, and indeed every Sunday and in every act of worship. At Christmas, for example, we remember the Holy Spirit’s work in the conception of Jesus, God’s Son. At Easter, we celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead and at Pentecost which we celebrated last Sunday, we read in the New Testament that the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to us. So it is best to think of Trinity Sunday as the “coda” on the unfolding drama of the Christian year particularly from Christmas to Pentecost - an opportunity to linger on what the entire history means about the nature of the God we worship. And that is precisely what our readings invite us to do.

The Bible is remarkably coy about talking about the Trinity. It leaves both the complexity and the neatness of Trinitarian theology for the Greek Fathers to expound resulting in the Creeds. Yet when the writers of the New Testament, the pastoral theologians, start to talk about God, they tell us of God who is like a father, the creator, Jesus who is uniquely the Son of God who redeems us, and God who is encountered in the Spirit and who guides us. In our second lesson, the well-known story of Nicodemus’ questions and confusion, we meet the Spirit, the Father and the Son and meet them as originators and bearers of grace. Yet we are only meeting one God. We can’t explain it, but why should we expect to?

Our readings today are two particularly significant passages of the Bible giving us important clues about the nature of the God we worship. The passage from Exodus is the only one in the Old Testament which offers an explanation of the meaning of the divine name. When Moses asks God for his name God answers with the words ‘I AM WHO I AM’, which can also be translated as ‘I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE’. What a sense of indefiniteness and mystery. I AM WHAT YOU WILL DISCOVER ME TO BE. I have always thought this one of the most exciting words about faith in the Bible. Here is a God who is active and he is there to be discovered. The easiest way to understand what the name Yahweh, translated as Jehovah in English, meant to the Jews is to see what it came to mean, as their history of
salvation slowly unrolled. It meant to them what the name Jesus came to mean to Christians, a ‘shorthand’ for all God’s dealings of grace.

When we come to the reading from St. John, Nicodemus is something of a puzzle. Some commentators see him as a failure, others as a gradual believer, yet others as deliberately ambiguous. It is hard to tell. He comes by night and he starts off by asking lots of questions and seemingly getting more confused, but then seems to fade into the background without us knowing what his ultimate conclusions are. But the important thing about him is that he asked questions. When John relates conversations that Jesus had with enquirers, he had a way of following a certain scheme. and we can see that scheme clearly in the conversation with Nicodemus. The enquirer says something. Jesus answers in a saying that is hard to understand. That saying is misunderstood by the enquirer. Jesus answers with a saying that is even more difficult to understand. And then there follows a discourse and explanation. I think John uses this method so that we can see people thinking things out for themselves and so that we might do the same.

Yet, defining the Trinity is beyond our imagination. God cannot be described or quantified with our human words. We are only able to begin to understand the nature of God when we engage in a deep relationship with God and each other. The relationship within the Trinity can help us to look at the way we relate to each other and the way we, as churches, operate. Our faith in the God who comes to us in a fellowship of love should make us more compassionate, merciful and faithful. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life”, writes John. Our God is revealed to us in community. We are called to live out our faith and to reflect God’s love in community. To be active in our thinking and in our doing.

The concept of the Trinity was born out of the attempt of Christians to define their faith in the one whom they called Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity tells us something about how God is revealed to us. We give thanks for it. But if our God is active so must we be. If God is creator, redeemer and guide, and we are called to engage in his work, how do we live out our faith? Do we live in the world as co-creators, redeemers and guides? That is more important than any definition.