Today is the perfect excuse. I can get away with it on Trinity Sunday. Yes, I can preach an academic sermon with absolutely no practical implications! After all, what could more academic and abstruse than the Trinity? Most people probably feel it’s a big yawn, like most academic subjects. Does it really matter?

Where I want start from today is not the Trinity itself, but why belief in a transcendent God who also took human form and is also a Spirit here with us today makes sense. The Trinity after all seems to be rather an esoteric concept today, when so many people even have trouble understanding or accepting God at all let alone a Trinitarian one. It seems a bit like arguing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin with someone who doesn’t believe in angels at all. Perhaps we need to address the basic belief first?

So what about that basic belief. Is God or a spiritual realm at all believable today? Not everyone would go as far in their atheism as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens but many people do have a feeling that science has done away with the need for God as an explanation for why we exist, or even proved that he does not exist. Now you have heard me talk before about how evolution, of the universe and us humans is not actually incompatible with a belief in God. But now I want to go further and demonstrate why science never will be able to prove there is no God but other ways of reasoning indicates that there probably is.

I have been taking an interest in philosophy. Now it has rather a bad name as an even more esoteric subject than how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But it shouldn’t. The dictionary describes it as “the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge of things and their causes; the study of ultimate realities and general principles.” What could be more relevant to religious belief than that? Whereas science is defined as “systematic and formulated knowledge; dealing with material phenomena and based on observation, experiment and induction.” That doesn’t sound so promising for investigating religion and the spiritual word, which is not about material phenomena and where experiment is of limited use. So the very definitions indicate that philosophy is a more promising field than science for investigating the existence and nature of God.

Many of us are tempted to adopt a common sense philosophy: what we see and feel is what there is. That sounds fine, but sense is not that common. And what is common may not be sense. If you jump in the sea you will get wet, as well as cold course if it is summer in Britain. So it seems common sense to assume the sea is wet. But how can we know if it is wet when we are not in it? Well, we can’t actually know, we just assume it is. This may seem trivial or just silly, but if we think about colours we can see that it could be important. When we look at a pretty coloured flower, is it still coloured when we are not looking? In fact it is not coloured at all, even when we are looking at it! It is only that the wavelength of light it reflects affects certain cells in our eyes in a way that our conscious brain interprets as, say, red. But the flower isn’t actually red; to someone who is colour-blind it might look grey. So called “common sense” is not that helpful after all.

Even more influential for the past few years has been science, or more specifically scientific materialism as a philosophy. This is the belief that science describes what is really there and anything it can’t describe is not really there. The only things that exist in this system are matter and energy that can be measured, observed or detected in some way. For science, consciousness, human will and moral behaviour is nothing more than electrical activity in the brain. Science is not concerned with the aim or purpose of things but just with the regular processes by which they change.

As I have just said this has been very influential, so much so that scientists like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking feel able to announce that God does not exist. They feel they can explain the universe by the big-bang and man by evolution, so there is no need for God. Now, with respect, but not much, this is just nonsense. My diversion into philosophy is to help us understand why it is nonsense for scientists to claim they have demonstrated God, or a spiritual force behind the universe, does not exist. It is nonsense because scientific materialism is just one philosophical system. It may have pretensions to explain everything, or at least be searching for a theory that does, but they are misplaced. Science is not a complete philosophical system; essentially it deals very well with “how” questions but not at all with “why” questions. Atheist scientists do of course say that “why” questions are inappropriate or meaningless, but that is just their opinion and it is of no more value than my opinion on women’s fashion or Rowan William’s view on economics; they have no expertise to comment on it. There is nothing in science that demonstrates whether God exists one way or the other.

More successful philosophies are those that attempt to explain the material world and the non-material, or world of human consciousness. This world undoubtedly exists, if only at the trivial level that we are conscious of colour, but it does not exist either in the flower we see or in our brains if they are dissected or studied with imaging techniques. There is something special about human consciousness and it points to a purpose; that the creation human consciousness may answer one of the “why” questions about the universe, again using our trivial example, we may exist so colour can be seen.

How is all this relevant to God as Trinity? Well I think it is relevant to the asking and answering of “why” questions about the universe. And the link with human consciousness. If God was simply what you might call an impersonal spiritual force behind the universe then there might be no connection at all with creatures like us. But our Christian history and faith indicates it is not like that. The God we believe in is not just transcendent, a technical term meaning outside the universe, but he is also in the universe, getting his hands dirty, as it were, if he had any hands. We believe he did have hands and did not just get them dirty but pierced, by being born as the man Jesus and dying on the cross. So we believe Jesus became a man to share our human perspective. But if that was all, just the Dynamic Duo, then we would now be alone. For Jesus as a man had to die, he could not be with us forever, as a man. Therefore the Holy Spirit is necessary to show us that God is still sharing the universe with us, he is not just pulling the strings from outside it.

I am not sure if this sounds convincing or not, but I think we should just regard the Trinity as a model, in the scientific sense. Like the way we might think of atoms in a gas as little billiard balls flying around and bouncing of each other. A model is useful when it helps to explain things, as it does to some extent for God. But the real world is always more complex than any model we can construct and it is not something to be followed slavishly where it does not seem to help.

So hopefully I have convinced you that we don’t need to fear the scientists and others who say there is now no room for God in the universe or in human life, because we have explained almost everything without him. We may have answered an awful lot of those “how” questions, but we have hardly started on the “whys” yet. I think the model we have of the God we do believe in as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a useful answer to the “how” question of how God relates to our human consciousness, but we still don’t understand why and I really don’t think we should make the Trinity some sort of exam question for Christians.

On this Trinity Sunday let’s just celebrate the beauty and complexity of God and how we can know his presence in our lives.