

Trinity Sunday 2020

John 3.16

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God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The word “giving” is one of the more positive words in the English language. The act of giving and the concept of gift are rightly associated with altruism, and with concern for, perhaps love for, the other. If I give something away, I am unlikely immediately to be thought selfish. Quite the opposite. Giving of myself, of my possessions or my finances or my time or my energy, seems exactly the right sort of thing to be doing if I am trying to follow the various gospel injunctions to leave self behind, or to love my neighbour as myself.

The problem, of course, is that in practice, giving is more complex. Actions do not take place in a moral vacuum, and however generous I may be, I can probably always be accused of some ulterior motive. For example, critics of religious faith can always accuse believers of being generous only because of a prior disposition to obey some religious code – in days gone by, we would probably have said “in order to get into heaven”. But more specific acts of giving are also vulnerable to being morally dissected – someone might allege that the philanthropist gives in order to be recognised by others, or to assuage the guilt of privilege; or that the spouse or partner gives in order to receive love and affection in return; or simply that the act of giving to those whom we love will always be an act of satisfaction – seeing my child happy will make me happy, and so on and so forth.

I think this line of criticism can be taken too far (and – you won’t be surprised to know – theologians and philosophers have done just that). But it does give us a

clue to help us think about the Christian doctrine of God, which we are celebrating this Trinity Sunday. As with so many aspects of theology, the key is not to assume that we can simply map our own experience and the networks of its meanings on to concepts which concern the divine. Theological talk should always be cautious, but we also need to be cautious about our caution. It's too easy to think that God talk is reasonable and comprehensible, but that talk of the Trinity is the point at which our reason has broken down. No: our reason has broken down as soon as we have used the word God. The creator is not a difficult puzzle to be solved, but rather is infinitely beyond our ken. That we can speak about God, is God's gift to us.

But God's gift, is not like our gift. And this, fundamentally, is what the doctrine of the Trinity is inviting us to learn. It is inviting us to imagine the possibility of genuinely selfless giving. An act of gift which cannot, by definition, result in any gain, because the giver cannot increase or improve in any way. In

the famous words of St Anselm, God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”. If I think of God as someone very good and very powerful, but someone I can get a handle on nevertheless, then it isn’t God of whom I am thinking.

God cannot gain. But God can, and does, give. The divine life is gift itself, but it is gift which has infinitely overstretched our concept of donation or reception. When we are invited to imagine a truly selfless giving, we are also being invited to reflect that such giving is not a giving away but rather a sharing. One should always be suspicious of anything which claims to “explain” Christian teaching, but if we were reduced to a short account of what the Trinity means, it would be something like the idea that giving and sharing are one and the same thing. What it means to be God is to be always given to the other in love. And because that mutual self-giving cannot but be mutual – in order for me to give, there must be a recipient of my giving – God receives the very life God gives in the

perfect love of the Trinity. And therefore there is a third word which needs to complete our picture. Giving and sharing are one and the same, because giving and sharing are both also always receiving.

For those of you interested in such things, what I've just outlined is a rather crude summary of one of the greatest of all theological works, a book called simply "On the Trinity", written in the early fifth century by St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine is adamant that the Trinity is not about understanding, but about loving. If we know what it means to love – to give of ourselves to another and have that love returned in reciprocal relationship, we can know and feel something of what God is trying to teach us about the divine life for which we are destined in Jesus Christ. Having some sense of one who loves, of the gift of loving, and of the experience and relationship which ensue are the closest we will get to the mystery into which we are invited by God's love for the world he has made.

And love, remember, is never abstract. Love is not real unless there is someone loving and someone being loved. And that is why our gospel text – John 3.16, perhaps the most famous of all gospel texts – is there to teach us not just how to think about God, but how to think about ourselves. God so loved the world that he gave... Love is always given, poured out, directed beyond ourselves and to the other. When Jesus tells us to love God and neighbour, he is expressing this double aspect of love – to love God is to recognise that giving of self is the ultimate form of living. But as Christians, we love God because we encounter his love in Jesus Christ, that is to say we meet God engaged in a twofold form of loving, because the example of Christ is the example of God giving to himself in love but giving of himself in love as well – Christ pours out his love for the Father and also pours out himself for the world he comes to save.

This is why the doctrine of the Trinity is always fundamentally practical. It is above love, and love is

never abstract. In essence, this most misunderstood of Christian doctrines is the easiest for us to come to terms with, for anyone who knows what it is to love is enfolded into the life of God. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.