

Trinity Sunday Year B 2021

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Well, we've reached the Sunday of the year when foolish clergy attempt to demonstrate their doctrinal chops; when the unwary plough into a sermon attempting to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. If you're lucky, you end up with something steering clear of heretical statements, but which is dull, impenetrable, or both. If you're unlucky, you end up by being spectacularly, misleadingly wrong. I would not be so vain as to promise to be entertaining or so hubristic as to promise doctrinal purity. But I think I can avoid the biggest bear traps by not trying to explain the Trinity in the first place. If one thinks of the Trinity as like a very complicated theory in Physics or an especially intricate machine, then one is seduced into thinking that the best approach is to find less complicated language to say the same thing. That's how you end up with the three foils of the clover leaf, or ice water and steam: images of the Trinity that are dangerously wrong. What's much more helpful, I think, is to consider how the Church ended up talking about the Trinity in the first place; after all, it's not something we see explicitly in the Scriptures. So how did we get there?

I think the first thing to recognise is that talking about the 'doctrine' of the Trinity can be unhelpful. After all, I don't go about talking about my relationship with the doctrine of God or saying that I believe that I am saved by the doctrine of the Atonement. Neither am I called to *preach* doctrines; I am called to preach "Christ Crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."¹

The fact that we have a feast of the Trinity should be our first clue. We don't have a feast of the Atonement: we have Good Friday – and indeed Easter – and every Sunday. Feasts are not about doctrines, but about the Church's experience of the Love of God – or, more accurately, *are* the Church's experience of the Love of God. The Trinity is not a very clever way for us to talk about God; it is the way we describe the experience of himself that *God* gives to *us*; from the earliest Christians to today's Eucharist. As

¹ 1 Cor. 1.23-24

such, the only way really to get to grips with what it might mean is to dive in – is to experience it. I talked a couple of weeks ago about being in love as a helpful analogy for what it means to have ideas about God. Someone can explain to us what it feels like to be in love, even show us brain scans which demonstrate which bits light up and talk us through the chemical processes that occur when the beloved is held in mind. But none of that really tells us what being in love *is* – you have to experience it really to know it. Christian doctrine is the Church's meditation on her experience of the love of her spouse. And, because love affairs – real, lifelong love affairs – grow and deepen, becoming richer and more profoundly intertwined with the stuff of our lives, the church's meditation has likewise grown in maturity and understanding. The more open we have been to the work of the Holy Spirit, the more deeply we have fallen in love with Christ, and the more deeply he has been rooted in the life of the Church he loves.

There is a caricature of the development of doctrine which says that the biblical faith was made complicated by the need to express everything in term of late-Antique philosophy; and so the biblical God gives way to the God of the Philosophers: unchanging and unchangeable. This is often overlaid with a sense of disapproval, that it all become unnecessarily complicated and leads us away from simple Bible truth. But this is profoundly to misunderstand what the Fathers of the Church were trying to do in the first few centuries CE as the creeds were formulated. It's pretty clear that the thing they were most concerned to do was remain faithful to Scripture – not to replace Scripture with something more up-to-date. You're far more likely to come across a row about the correct interpretation of a verse of Proverbs than you are about the correct application of Plato's *Phaedra*. Indeed, many of the most famous heresies arise because of an attempt to follow the science, as it were, and ignore inconvenient scriptural witness in order to be consistently philosophical.

As an aside, it's also nonsense to talk about Greek philosophy and the Scriptures as if they were hermetically different things. The Scriptures were produced in a thoroughly Greek milieu, what we now call the Hellenic world – a culture that spread across southern Europe, north Africa and Asia Minor which was profoundly eclectic and saw a rich exchanged between different cultures through the medium of the Greek language. This is of course true of the New Testament, which was still under

construction, but also of the books of the Hebrew Bible – which is what the earliest theologians mean when they talk about Scripture – which almost certainly received their final version during the last few centuries before Christ. The Hebrew Scriptures that most Christians (and indeed a great many Jews) will have used as the creeds were formulated was the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. So the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are already a revelation of God in the same language and intellectual culture as those philosophers whose ideas were found useful by the Fathers of the Church.

As they sought to articulate the Faith, the Fathers were always asking, along with the rich young man who approached Jesus, “how can I be saved?” And the answer, as we have been exploring over the Easter season, is very simply: Jesus. We are saved not through a legal fiction, where God declares us to be what we are not: Righteous. We are saved because the righteousness, the faithfulness, the holiness of Christ become ours. For late-Antique contemporaries whose philosophical language the Fathers borrowed, salvation consisted in escape from the flesh: but for Christians, salvation consists in the divinization of the flesh, the taking up of the flesh into the life of God. Christ, the first-fruits² of this new, divinized creation, is the means by which God draws all humanity into himself. And so, the Fathers reasoned, Christ must himself have been God – his humanity wholly taken up into God himself. He was not simply divine, or some kind of angel or lesser god, but God himself. And how does our flesh follow Christ’s into the heart of God? By the action of the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Spirit is the beginning of our understanding of God as Trinity. The Fathers did not begin with philosophical speculation, but with prayer. And our second lesson today tells us what prayer is. Prayer is not something we do – it is not, primarily, asking for things. Prayer is something the Spirit does in us. The Holy Spirit prays in us in “sighs too deep for words”³ and, as he does so, our spirit is united with his and enables us to approach the Father not as supplicants but as sons, as co-heirs with Christ to the new, divine humanity. When we pray, it is not just that God is at work in us, but that we have been taken up into the heart of God himself. So the Fathers begin not with the categories of Aristotle, or the ideas of Plato, or the

² 1 Cor. 15.20; cf. Rom. 8.23, 11.16; 2 Thess. 2.13; and in the non-Pauline writings, Jas. 1.18 & Rev. 14.4

³ Rom. 8.26

speculations of Stoics, but with the prayer of the Church. For it is in the prayer of the Church that God is revealed, that God is present. We baptise in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; in the Eucharist we pray the prayer of Christ to his Father in the Power of the Spirit, the prayer of love poured out on the cross and answered in the resurrection. With St Paul, we share the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.⁴ And at the heart of Christian worship are the Scriptures, that bear witness to the indivisible Oneness of God, whilst also revealing God as Word, Wisdom, and Spirit, active in the world and drawing to himself a chosen people. The Trinity is not something clever we have invented; it is revealed to us in all these ways, and, pre-eminently in the way Jesus talked about his relationship with his Father and the Spirit whom the Father would send.

And so we worship God, Father Son and Holy Spirit; and acclaim that these three are the One God of Israel. We say that God is indivisible, and that the life of God is the love shared by these three. This is a mystery. Now, a mystery is not something that unknowable; rather it is something that is not patient of the kind of thought processes we usually use to come to know things. That's not to say that there aren't true and logical things one can say about a mystery, just that those things are infinitely outstripped by its reality. A mystery is something we can only know by participation, by joining in. Which brings us back to what we were saying about being in love. To say that the Trinity – or the presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the incarnation – is a mystery means that there is a limit to what we can say about it, or even think about it. But it also means that there is no limit to how deeply we can understand it by the Spirit' drawing us deep into its reality. The Church says, in its creeds and in its liturgy, what can be said – and nothing more. But as we join with the whole Church, living and departed, in praying the prayer of the Church, we are drawn infinitely into the mysteries of divine love until we are one with the glory of the eternal Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ 2 Cor. 13.13