

Trinity Sunday 2023

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“He who sings, prays twice.” These words, of St Augustine of Hippo, are a gift to the church musician, and to all who value the place of music in worship. They are also particularly suitable for Trinity Sunday, because the Christian teaching that God is three persons in one substance has never been more profoundly discussed than by the same St Augustine, a north African philosopher and rhetorician who lived from 354-430 AD and became one of the supreme thinkers of the Christian tradition. So far so good. Unfortunately, “he who sings, prays twice” appears nowhere in the extant writings of the great bishop and teacher. As is so often the case, the famous quotation is not a quotation at all, except a quotation from false attributions of the saying.

However, in his commentary on Psalm 73, Augustine writes the following: *For he that sings praise, not only praises, but only praises with gladness: he that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves him of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving.* This is a fascinating little nugget which deserves much more unpacking than I can offer here. For now, we can simply note the connection which Augustine makes between singing

praise, and loving: praise is a speaking forth, singing is the affection of love.

Augustine wrote a great deal about music. In his spiritual autobiography, the Confessions, he wrote about the dangers of some music as what he considered sensory temptation. But in an extensive treatise entitled simply “On Music”, he builds upon St Paul’s exhortation to Christians to teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, arguing that the ultimate goal of music is the transcendence of its emotional appeal, and the ordered and harmonious way in which it directs us to what he considered the truth of God himself.

Augustine’s experience of music was, as far as we can tell from studying the ancient world, rather different to our own. But the possibilities created by harmonic activity resonated for him as well as for us. On Trinity Sunday there is often sympathy for the preacher tasked with – apparently – explaining this most difficult of Christian doctrines. But, quite apart from the fact that God can never be explained, we might point out that listening to a single human voice speaking, serves only to remind us how much more is possible in song, and in polyphonic singing

in particular. To illustrate this point, I am going to conduct a very simple aural demonstration, or rather, Dan is going to do so. **(DAN – PLAY a C)**

What can you hear? A single note. It's a C. We would probably all agree that it's perfectly reasonable to call that one sound. **(DAN – PLAY a C and a G together)**. Now you can hear two sounds at the same time. Except, of course, that those two sounds are also one sound – a single chord. And notice how, in the chord, each of the notes sounds as it does because the other is also being played. **(DAN – play C major triad)**. Now we can hear what we call a major triad, three notes, spaced at numbers 1, 3 and 5 in a major scale. This chord sounds the way it does because of each of the three notes which make it up. Is it one sound, or is it three sounds? Is it both? What's clearly the case is that the original note C sounds different because of the other two notes, whilst remaining the original note C. The same is true for the other two notes which make up the chord. Each is what it is because of the other two, and each is still the same note.

Now of course these aural illustrations can be overdone. But it's worth reflecting that music gives us a far better way into the idea of the Trinity than any of the silly visual gimmicks beloved of Sunday school teachers,

such as the three leaved clover, three different hats or three hares with common ears. And a single chord is only the very beginning of musical possibility when it comes to expressing the beauty of God. Listen carefully to the communion motet and you will hear the seemingly infinite potential of a simple triad, as a series of threefold chords develops into the full glory of polyphony. That polyphonic glory, which we take far too easily for granted in this church, expresses as fully as can be Augustine's contention that music leads us into divine truth. And the idea of leading could not be more appropriate, because it is the moving parts of the harmonic lines, the ways in which they feed in and out of one another, which sings to us the essential truth that relationship is the essential truth of God.

We completely mistake Christian teaching on the Trinity if we think of God as something static which is somehow both three things and one thing. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity shows us a God perfectly in motion, a divine life in which the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are who and what they are only because of the eternal pattern of giving and receiving which is the dynamic movement of divine love. It is the outpouring of love to another, and the receipt of love from another, which is at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. And hence it is the motion of divine love which invites us to participate in that life, by giving

of ourselves in love, and recognising in the transcendence of created beauty, the ability to go beyond ourselves and be led towards the infinity of divine truth.

That truth is personified in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ we see the life of the trinity incarnated, lived out as a human being. The perfect offering of the Son to the Father which we celebrate in this eucharist is a glimpse of the divine perfection to which we are drawn by the work of the Spirit in the world into which it breathes life. In God's gift of music we are led into his divine life, and taught the truth that the dynamics of perfect relationship are the ultimate beauty of creation, because creation is poured out from the perfect love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He who sings, prays very much more than twice.