

May 18, 2008

Today is arguably the highpoint of the church year, Trinity Sunday, a festival marking the revelation of God as he is for us – a triune reality of three distinct persons in a tight, unifying bond, the culmination of all which took place from the original Christmas to Pentecost some 30-odd years later.

Yet for most of us these days the Trinity presents just another odd thing to believe, another doctrine or story which doesn't make a lot of sense to what we think are our modern ways of thinking. It is not difficult – and is increasingly common – for believers to look back at our tradition and wonder why the church bothered to construct such doctrines or tell such stories as we find in the scriptures.

This is not least because today we today stand in a different relationship to all the doctrines and stories than did the church which thought to formulate and tell them in the first place. The difference is this: once upon a time the church did not have a doctrine of the Trinity, for example, but simply reflected upon an experience of God.<sup>1</sup> And, in reflecting on those experiences, in seeking to make sense of what it had come to know in terms of what it knew before, the once-upon-a-time church developed the doctrines which have been handed to us. Our tradition of stories and doctrines is what the early church was forced to conclude must be the case, if indeed it had experienced in the person of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth a new dimension of the God it previously knew: *if* we have come to know love and life through this crucified Jesus, then God must be described somewhat as the doctrines of the Trinity do. The precise logic of their thinking need not concern us here, but simply the process: *if* Jesus, *then...* (this or that can be said about God).

Our problem, however, as those who come later, is that we find ourselves in a very different situation. We receive the tradition as a completed thing in itself, a package of stories and doctrines which exists before we get to it, and seems to be delivered as a pill to be swallowed whole. And so, for example, we have the Creed. At some stage someone *taught*

<sup>1</sup> Here and generally in this reflection, "doctrine" will be used to cover a couple of things which could be distinguished from each other. Strictly speaking we can distinguish between the *dogma* of the Trinity (the simple assertion that God is Father, Son and Spirit, such as we find in the Creed), and *doctrines* of the Trinity, which are theologians' attempts to understand *how, or in what way*, God is a trinity.

us the Creed, and what we learned may have had nothing to do with anything we had yet experienced. All we *did* experience at that point was the learning of the Creed itself, and we understandably come to ask, how is this "relevant" to us? By this very common question we mean to ask, how can this strange story with its underlying doctrines be *my* story? We are taught that God is a Trinity before we've experienced the crisis which saw Trinity-talk arise in the first place. And so we almost *have* to ask, What has God as Trinity got to do with us?

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The best we might do in answering that question is simply to suggest how our "idea" of God might be stretched along New Testament lines, and to indicate why it might then be helpful to speak of God in this way. I referred a moment ago to the ecumenical Creed we say here most weeks, a statement of faith which itself is structured in a 3-fold way, reflecting its trinitarian content. For our purposes today the important thing to note is simply the *appearance* of the Creed as it is printed on the page and, in particular, the fact that the middle section, or the "second article" which deals with "God the Son" is by far the longest section. This is a clue to what talk of God as Trinity might be pointing toward.

The reason that second article is so long is that it is the most controversial. And the controversy has to do with the link that section makes between God and humankind. "God is creator" – as is declared in the first article of the Creed – is scarcely a controversial proposal if you're already convinced that there "is" a God; "God is Spirit" – as declared in the third article – is similarly uncontroversial for the religious. But "God is born and dies a human being" – this is not the normal pattern of religious or secular thinking. The real problem Christian talk of God presents to us is the little credal line, "And he became truly human". This problem has been known from the beginning: *can* God be identified with a human being – indeed, with a dead human being, hanging on a cross? The church has answered, "Yes", and the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the forms of that yes.

Now we might begin see that the Trinity is not a difficult thought about the God's divine nature but a statement of the *humanity* of God. At the heart of this God is not a mysterious, impenetrable divinity,

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but humanity – our humanity. We do not know God apart from how he has been for us; the God we know is only the God who is *for* us. But we can and must push it further. It is not only that we know that God is *for* us, “on our side”, as it were. We also know that God is *by* us, in the sense of *through* us, or *via* us. Now, if I were being careful I’d qualify that with all kinds of provisos and conditions, but we have discussion groups for that. Let us, instead, run with the risky overstatement a bit further and see where we end up.

The two New Testament readings we’ve heard today include a couple of the few trinitarian summaries we find in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> By themselves these texts simply present to us again the problem we usually have with the Trinity. But in the Old Testament reading and the Psalm we find something rather unexpected. Psalm 8 marvels at that extraordinary creature, the human being, and God’s interest in us; “you have made them a little lower than gods”, we might translate the fifth verse. The Genesis reading was the first of the creation stories, which (the Sabbath aside) culminates with the creation of the human being “in the image of God”. We have, then, what is perhaps an *unexpected* setting alongside of each other readings which evoke our recollection of the trinitarian tradition and readings which highlight the significance of the human being as a pinnacle of creation, the “image of God”.

What is hinted at in these Old Testament texts on the dignity of the human being takes on a new intensity when we turn to the New Testament’s reflection on the ministry of Jesus. In the gospel of John the declaration of the psalmist that “you have made them a little lower than gods” finds its intensification when the evangelist declares that the Word became flesh, with the important corollary that the flesh is now not “a little lower than the gods” but bears *all* the content of divinity.<sup>3</sup> In the reflections of Paul the proposal of Genesis that humankind is made in the image of God has its intensification in the application of the image to Jesus alone (before all others and yet *for* all others).<sup>4</sup> The image of God is now downplayed as a character in which we all share and focussed on the human being Jesus of Nazareth – the one who also bears the title “Son” of God. More importantly, not only is it Jesus the man who is the bearer or the image of the divine, it is the *crucified* Jesus who fills this role. The image of God is the stark sight of a crucified man. The question which ultimately delivered us the exaggerated length of the middle of our creed is, *Can the aching, dying, dry bones of such an “image” live?* To say that God is Trinity is to

answer, Yes: this God is radically marked by human being as it is found here and now, and in that marking is able to heal us.

To speak of God as Trinity is to speak about the human being in terms of divinity, and divinity in terms of human being. It is to so link God and ourselves that the one cannot properly be spoken of without reference to the other, because the one cannot properly *be* without reference to the other.€ The fourth century theologian Athanasius declared that the God became a human being so that human beings might become God.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that’s another marvellous overstatement of the case which should be qualified, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and our times are desperate.

The difference the trinitarian doctrine makes in desperate times is the creation of hope. There is hope in the trinitarian doctrine, for it declares to us that human beings belong properly in the heart of God – hidden, Paul suggests, with the humanity of Christ the Son, in God. Our natural habitat is not at a distance from God, *reflecting* his being as “through a glass darkly”; we are created to inhabit *God*. And God makes this rehabilitation – this “reinhabitation” – possible even now.

This is the true mystery of the Trinity; not how one is three and three is one (which is in fact fairly easily modelled), but how what is dead might yet live, how what is human might also be divine, how what is hopeless might lift up its head. In the story of God which the trinitarian faith tells, we learn that might find, to borrow from Joyce’s poem earlier, life beyond the lives we know, clarifying colour and reordering of the chaotic deeps we hide and trouble over.<sup>6</sup>

Whether we can give a satisfactory accounts of the ins and outs of the life of God is neither here nor there. But that we might have faith to hope for the love which God promises and desires to bring into our lives is surely a prayer worth praying.

By the grace of God, may it be found on the lips of all his people.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> De inc. 54, 3: PG 25, 192B.

<sup>6</sup> “Revelation and the crystal sea”: Enveloped in refracted light / I walk miles out / upon a solid crystal sea.// Revealed in depth / new shapes, life / beyond the lives I know / clarifies colour / and re-orders my chaotic deeps. (Joyce Lee, Bountiful Years, p35)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28.16-20 and 2 Corinthians 13.11-13.

<sup>3</sup> John 1.14; cf. Colossians 2.9.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Colossians 1.15, Philippians 2.6f, 1 Corinthians 15.45-49, Romans 5.14-19.