

30 May 2010

TRINITY C

Sermon notes: John 16.12-15

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Today is Trinity Sunday, and it's usually the case that on this day the subject of the sermon is the doctrine of the Trinity, and it will be no different here today, at least! But there's a danger that focussing on the Trinity on a particular day in this way which distracts us from its utter centrality to Christian faith. For reasons which will become a little clearer (I hope!) in what I'm about to say, there is nothing in the particular business of the church which does not touch upon this understanding of God.

Nevertheless, the Trinity generally presents to us a problem of seemingly incomprehensible divine mathematics – how to make one three and three one, in such a way that God is both three and one. We are all familiar enough with the problem, although I confess that I don't really see what the problem is. We are familiar enough with many things which are both one and many in the same moment. So, for example, a nuclear family in which the parents are married (and so mutually defined as husband and wife) and the children are direct fruit of that relationship is a very helpful way of speaking of oneness – in the unity of the family – and multiplicity – in the different identities and the different kinds of relationships each has to the other.

But more fundamental than dealing with the "how" of the Trinity, is the "why": what difference does this make? My thinking here has been prompted a bit by having begun to read Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*<sup>1</sup>. This is not proving to be a very happy experience, but it is an instructive one. For the reason that Dawkins – and many like him – is so successful in his critique of belief is that he is, for the most part, right. That is, *what* they criticise is very much what troubles many believers themselves. We find ourselves having to say "Yes" to many of the polemical points. And so, for example, Dawkins is able to demonstrate what he calls the "characteristically obscurantist flavour of theology" (p.34) and its interest in "splitting hairs" (p.33) by citing a couple of singularly unhelpful statements of trinitarian doctrine from sources you might imagine would actually be helpful. And so he taps into uncertainty within faith itself – whether about the character of belief, or the behaviour of believers, or whatever. And it's very easy to be carried along the way, and

many of us are. Dawkins effectively declares that it is the beliefs of general "practising theists in the pew" he is interested in and not those of "sophisticated theologians"<sup>2</sup> (59f). If it is *your* experience of doctrine that it's all "too hard", or you're inclined to abandon it to "mystery" because it doesn't make a lot of sense, and prefer instead to throw yourself into *doing* Christian faith instead of understanding it, then you are with Dawkins here. And this is why this kind of atheistic polemic is so effective; it resonates with our concerns about what passes for "belief" in so many of us.

Yet the critical thing about our experience of this kind of theology is not difficulty itself but the sense that it is all too far away (from us). Many of us understand many very difficult things – *because they matter to us*. Consider the traditional graphical ways in which the Trinity is represented, a triangle with three sides, linked together (of course!), one side or point or angle representing each person; a three-leaf clover; three inter-locked circles; the three pronged Celtic knot (the Triquetra). In each instance the symbol seems all to be about "God" and we rightly ask, "and what about *us*?" This kind of God – the trinitarian God in particular – seems to be an abstraction from our real and present situation. What is the *point* of getting God "right", in this theological sense?

For the thing we are most interested in – the thing which entertains our thoughts most of the time – is actually *we ourselves*: who we are, what we are, how we are to act, what we might rightly expect, what our responsibilities are and to whom we *are* responsible. Now there is nothing particularly wrong with this. The Bible itself is very much interested in us, and in fact only ever concerns itself with God in God's relation to us as creator, covenant maker, judge, redeemer, and so on. The only issue with this self-interest is the question, how do we in fact go about *answering* those questions about who and what we are?

By way of offering a Christian answer to that question and, so, by answering with reference to the Trinity, I want to spend a little time drawing attention to the classic Creed of the church (the Nicene and Apostles Creeds). Taking my suggestion that in most of our talk and actions we are most interested in ourselves as human beings, consider the (Apostles) Creed and attempt an answer to the question, "Where are we *human beings* in the creed?" Arguably we can be found in each of the three articles. In so far as we are "creatures" we are in the article about the Father, and we are in the article about the Son if

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<sup>1</sup> Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> Although, on the basis of whom he cites in his book, it is not apparent that Dawkins has read any particularly "sophisticated" theists.

we allow that Jesus (with Mary and Pilate) is one of us. But we are most obviously in the third article: I believe in the church; I believe in the communion of saints; I believe in the forgiveness of sins; I believe in the resurrection of the body; I believe in the life everlasting. Or, as the church as traditionally summarised it, "I believe in the Holy Spirit".

Now the point of all this is that, if it is indeed the case that we are most concerned about who and what we are as human beings, we can understand the article about the Spirit as the *starting* point of talk about God in a Christian way. It is here, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> article, that our self-interest is met. For it is here – in connection with the gift of the Spirit – that we feature in the confession of faith.

And this brings us, finally, to our gospel reading this morning (John 16.12-15), which builds on themes we heard from John last week. Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the "Spirit of truth" who "will guide you into all the truth", speaking not of his own but declaring to you what he has heard.

This Spirit will also declare to us "the things that are to come". And I'll focus particularly on this thought, for the biblical warping of time comes into play here to suggest an unexpected destination of "thing to come". If we were to read this "chronologically", "the things which are to come" would seem to be "the resurrection of the dead" and "the life everlasting". This is certainly the natural sense. But if the article about the Spirit is our *starting* place, the place where we *begin*, then the end towards which we move is not the typical "end-things" listed here under the Spirit. The end is what was hinted at in last week's gospel reading: *that we might see the Father*, by seeing Jesus. John's gospel announces *as* the gospel that the Word became flesh and that, while "one has ever seen God", it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1.18). The end, the goal, of Christian faith is seeing "the Father". The message which the risen Jesus gives Mary to carry to the disciples is, ...go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and [now] your Father, to my God and [now] your God (John 20.17). That is, Jesus' knowledge and experience of God – "my Father" is now to become the disciples': "*your Father*".

So while we typically read the Creed as being about something which unfolds with the passage of time – first our experience of God the Father and creation, then an experience of the Son and redemption, and finally an experience of the Spirit and sanctification (the "end things"), it makes more *Christian* sense to read it backwards: through the work of the Spirit our humanity is formed along the lines of the humanity of Jesus himself, so that we might know God as Jesus

does. The "things that are to come" are not then a list of events – even typical end-time ones; what is to come is the experience of God at home with us, which is what we say is the meaning of the Father-Son language of Christian trinitarian confession. The future is "the Father", experienced in the Son, made possible by the work of the Spirit. It is this future, and this process towards it, which is the reason for Christian trinitarian talk.

But there is one more transformation of our understanding of trinitarian talk which it would be helpful to make, which concerns the word "believe": "I *believe* in God...". "Believe" is a word which, "religiously", doesn't help us very much these days. For it serves in both a sentence like "I believe in God the Father", but also "I believe that Collingwood is playing the Bulldogs today", and the two uses are often confused. That is, the sense is often given that "I believe, as a matter of fact, that God exists." It is just this kind of believing which Richard Dawkins and others are particularly good at undermining. We get around the mundane use of "believe" by asserting that "I believe in God" has a meaning like "I have faith" or "I trust".

But, then, why not simply substitute "trust" in place of "believe"? It works very well in the Greek, so is a valid translation, but most importantly, it seems to me radically to change what it means – or *feels like* – so say the Creed. "I trust in God the Father" – or even "I trust *that* God the Father...". Now the Creed takes on a specifically future feel, invoking connotations of promise, incompleteness, and also of a choice among options. I *trust* that God the Spirit – and not something else – is making me into the human being I should be; I *trust* that the humanity of Jesus is effective for me; I trust that Jesus' experience of God will become mine. I trust in this, I look forward to it, I wait for it, I live as if it will be so.

This way of saying it opens up again how *trinitarian* talk of God is, in fact, not at all abstracted from our reality, but has to do with our *transformation*. In response to our basic concern about ourselves, here is a vision of what it means to be human: *where we are destined as a clue to how we should then live*. How God is – as a tri-unity – is a matter of what we shall be, and so a sign of what we are to do. God as Trinity becomes then critical to our understanding of God because it is critical to what matters *most* to us – *ourselves*. The humanity of the Son as *our* humanity – and so as the source of our relationship to the heart of God – is the end-point of the gift of the Spirit. As such, it is the end or the goal which is held out for us who desperately seek ourselves.

Trinitarian faith is a life in which the pilgrimage towards God and the pilgrimage towards ourselves, is a path with these twin destinations. This is the gift which is given in Jesus of Nazareth – the good news of the gospel, and this is why we confess God so.

May God bless us with ever deeper understanding and experience of what we are in God's trinitarian life. Amen.

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**Re-ising ("Re-seeing") the Creed:**

I trust in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

I trust in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the  
Father,  
and he will come again to judge the living  
and the dead.

I trust in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

Amen.