

THE TRINITY – the dream team of the Christian faith

Well, we've done it again. The England cricket team, not content with being out for 51 in a Test in the West Indies last winter, have now contrived to lose a 20/20 international to Holland. Not a football match, mark you; a cricket match. So with the Australians coming for the Ashes in a few weeks time the conversation in pubs all over the country is bound to change from being 'what's your dream team for the Ashes?' to simply 'Have we got a team for the Ashes, or should we ask the pub team to deputise?'

The dream team. Today we celebrate the dream team of the Xn faith – we call it the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

God in creation, God in history, God in us.

God above us, God beside us, God within us.

There are all sorts of ways to start the conversation about the Trinity. But who's listening? Who's interested? Who woke up this morning trembling with excitement that it's Trinity Sunday? Did anyone rush out on to the streets with the good news?

Here we are, celebrating what in Christian terms is the dynamic heart of all creation, the most fundamental reality on which we all depend for our very existence, and we don't find it (most of us) terribly interesting.

Which is the fault of people like me – we fail to communicate the excitement of God. We're too diffident in putting forward our belief in the magnificent Christian vision of God. There's a shuffling of the feet, a pause in the conversation, a movement towards the door. There's a story of a church congregation which was obviously in numerical decline and the vicar was talking to his churchwarden. 'Well,' said the churchwarden, 'I'm no expert, vicar, but perhaps you shouldn't end each sermon by saying, "But then again, what do I know." '

On the Trinity, however, what do any of us know? We're on the edge of the mystery of God's own reality. We're talking here about ultimacy. This is like my one year old granddaughter trying to understand a university course on high energy physics. Even more - it's Hamlet trying to understand Shakespeare. It's really a category mistake. It's not surprising we're out of our depth. But let's just map the territory and see where we get to. A man once said to a preacher at the end of the service, 'I came to hear your sermon because I didn't understand the subject. I still don't understand it – but on a higher level.'

1. The people who built Canterbury cathedral where I used to work, or Chartres, or Notre Dame, or even this chapel, had a huge vision of God - God the Creator, God above, God beyond human telling. They wanted somehow to respond to the blistering beauty of God, and they started with a big vision. Beware the family-size version of God, the flat pack, DIY, easy assembly, no-risk version of God. If God is God at all, then God is spectacularly beyond our conventional categories.

Some years ago I went to the Himalayas to trek to Annapurna base camp in the Annapurna Sanctuary. Annapurna is the eighth highest mountain in the world; in old money it's over 26,000 ft high. (Scafell Pike is just over 3000). I've been fascinated by this mountain for decades and eventually I got the chance to go. We arrived at Pokhara, the nearest town to Annapurna, in the early evening and it was cloudy. There was no chance of seeing our mountain, which in any case was still many miles away – Pokhara was simply the nearest you could get on a road. So the next morning I jumped out of bed to see this great sight. But again, nothing. It was raining, and I couldn't see this classic mountain. So we spent the day collecting a trekking permit and finding two sherpas to guide us and carry the heaviest of our gear.

The next morning I leapt out of bed again, went to the window and looked out. But again – no mountain. I was just about to go down and complain when I glanced up, seriously up above me. And there, way above the clouds, way above where I would have dared to look, there was Annapurna. I was raising my eyes as I do for a mountain in the Lake District. This was simply another category altogether. It was life-changing.

And that is the kind of God Christians talk about. A quite different scale from the One we might imagine during Matins.

But then, at the other end of the scale, the tiny end, we're faced with staggering detail. For example, the human brain has about ten billion switching elements (neurons), and the average neuron has between 1000 and 10,000 synapses or links with adjacent neurons. If each synapse responds to a simple question with a yes or no answer, the number of answers that the brain could come up with is almost unimaginable. Perhaps more understandably, there are more cells in one of our fingers than there are people in the entire world. In other words, if God is God at all, then God is spectacularly beyond our tiny efforts to place him or understand him. (Excuse the 'him', by the way – God must be beyond gender, though not beyond personality, as the Source of all personhood.)

So this is not a God I need to defend. It would rather be on a par with an uncaged lion being defended by a mouse with a wet leaf. Our Christian forebears, who built our great cathedrals and chapels, who founded our universities, who established these sermons, these forebears must have started with a huge vision of God the Creator.

2. As well as the vision of God the Creator, those Christians forebears of ours needed a down-to-earth God to bring God into focus. They needed a filter, or maybe a transformer, so that the immensity of God the Creator wouldn't simply blow them away. They needed Jesus, God down to earth, God beside them, God in human shape. God, they believed, had given us a self-portrait. This was as close as we were going to get. The tip of the divine iceberg. Jesus.

Jesus is the heart and soul of Xy. But there's an interesting synergy here with what we've just been thinking about in God as Creator. Any biochemist knows, with reference to DNA, that what lies at the heart of every living thing is information, words - to be precise a single 64 word code which has spelt 'life' in all living things for all time. Reality, it seems, is *spoken*, and this, curiously, is how the people of God have always understood it as well. In the beginning God spoke (Genesis 1) and the universe was created. In the Old Testament God's words are the active agents of life itself. But then in the New Testament we have this: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. 'Logos' was the word John used to describe Jesus – a word which combined the Greek idea of the rational principle behind the universe with the Jewish idea of the active word of God in creation. Poetry certainly, but the poetry of reality. Jesus is God's Word, and he learned his lines so that he was, you might say, 'Word perfect'.

I'm a Xn because of JC. I find him fascinating, compelling, challenging, irresistible. The way he lived and taught; the way he went to the heart of things, and turned our questions upside down. The way he comforted the disturbed and disturbed the comfortable. The way he lived as the most vitally alive human being the world has known; the way he died, and what he did with death in resurrection. Jesus towers over human history. He eludes all our attempts to categorise him. He simply seems to speak and act for God.

HG Wells once wrote: 'I am a historian; I am not a believer. But I have to admit, as a historian, that this penniless preacher from Galilee is irresistibly the centre of history.' One after another our heroes are brought down; the red tops love it; look out for whose turn it is this week. But Jesus –

never. He's unassailable, the heart and soul of Xy, the one who gave away his pomp and circumstance, and introduced us to a land of hope and glory – though paradoxically that glory was seen most vividly on a cross. There the glory of love was raised before us, unforgettably.

3. So our Christian forebears needed, first, a vision of God big enough to encompass creation – God the Creator, God the Father of all. They needed the presence of the down to earth God, Jesus, to be the icon of God, the touchstone of faith. And they needed, thirdly, the energy of the Holy Spirit to fill the church, God's people, with life and purpose. God within. God the mysterious stranger, closer than our heart beat, breath of life.

There is of course a lot of confusion about the Holy Spirit. I once went into my daughter's class at primary school and had a look in their writing books where they'd been doing some work on the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. There I saw references to the 'holy sprite', the 'holy spit' and the 'holy spite'! I'm sure the lesson plan meant well! I'm afraid that sometimes there is holy spite amongst Christians. There was once a notice on a Church noticeboard advertising a future event. It said: 'The Church will host an evening of fine food, superb entertainment and gracious hostility.' The Anglican Communion seems to have read that notice this last few years.

But the Holy Spirit is always trying to heal and reconcile our hostility – God is the go-between God, the God of connections, of fellowship, the divine glue holding us together. And, at the same time, the divine energy that throws us out into the world to serve a God of extravagant compassion. I find it fascinating that Christians are always to be found working in the darkest places of our planet. Writing in the Guardian in 2008, Simon Jenkins said: 'Whenever I have visited poor places – such as Salford, St Paul's Bristol or London's Poplar – and wondered to whom the desperate turn in time of need, the finger points to the church. Of all voluntary institutions, those based on religion are the most present and the most committed. One reason is that the parish priest is the last profession that still rates it essential to live among its clients. All the rest have fled.'

And listen to Matthew Parris, who recently went back to Malawi where he said he reconnected with a belief he had been trying to banish all his life. 'It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my world view and has embarrassed my belief that there is no God. I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa, sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real... ' He went on: 'Whenever we entered a territory worked by missionaries we had to acknowledge that something changed in the faces of the people we passed and spoke to: something in their eyes, the way they approached you direct, man to man, without looking down or away. They hadn't become more deferential towards strangers but more open...'

I've chosen two non-believers to make the point. The power and reality of the Spirit in peoples lives changes them and energises them for compassion and action. We're not talking theory here; this is practical, real-time service and sacrifice, empowered by the Spirit.

The Trinity. God's dream team

And it's not just our forebears who discovered, through experience, the rich reality of the Trinity. Christians find the same today – we need a multi-dimensional understanding of God to do justice to the many ways we experience the divine. The Father who sustains us. The Son who befriends us. The HS who energises us for service. It's unique to the Christian faith of course. Other faith traditions have their own understanding of God, but the Trinity is a wonderfully rich and dynamic

model – a community of love, simple and complex, accessible and subtle, God beyond our imagination and yet God-with-us. Brilliant.

And there's nothing airy-fairy about this understanding of God. It's a gritty, practical doctrine. One of the classic Trinitarian hymns is St Patrick's breastplate – 'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity'. The early monks put that protection around them as they started the day or as they started doing anything special. I know Christians who do that still. 'The strong name of the Trinity.'

The Christian dream team, then, is the Trinity, by whom we are created (the Father), by whom we are inspired (the Son), and by whom we are empowered to go and make a difference in the world (the Holy Spirit). Whether that last extends to the England cricket team has yet to be seen, but the Christian vision is the transformation of all human life under God, a world of justice and joy.

So, in the name of God, F, S and HS - let's go and make a difference.