

Holy Trinity – Headington 2007

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You do me a very great honour in inviting me here to preach for your patronal feast, and I thank you for it. There is, however, something of a problem in attempting to talk about the Holy Trinity, namely that it is quite difficult to do so without lapsing into heresy; for one can end up either by talking as though there are three gods or by saying that there is indeed one God, but that it has three modes or masks or different faces, and the Church has discovered down the millennia that we have to steer between those two opposed shoals on which we might get ship-wrecked.

One solution to the problem was that reached by the late Cardinal Heenan, who when he was Archbishop of Westminster used to earn the gratitude of his clergy by writing an encyclical letter to be read instead of the homily each year on the feast. That option is not available to us today, so we must do what we can.

And what we cannot do is to present the doctrine of the Trinity as a mathematical conundrum invented for the sole purpose of keeping theologians in business. So try this: what the doctrine of the Trinity says is that at the heart of the matter, at the heart of creation, is the rich mystery of love; and that this is because that is the way God is: the mystery of God has an inner dynamism or richness or love (and notice how we struggle for words as soon as we try to talk about it).

Now that mystery cannot, of course, be described, but it can be pointed to; and we do our pointing by absolutely refusing to make the choice between Three and One. God is One, of course, but God is also Three, and we have to insist on both. Why is this? It is because the early Christians, who were for the most part sane and sober men and women, not disposed to invent mysteries unless they had to, discovered that they could not do justice to the reality of their experience of Jesus, especially in the light of the Resurrection, unless they used of him language, like “Lord”, for example, or “Judge”, that had hitherto been reserved for God. More than that, they discovered that using language of that sort made sense, and has continued down the ages to make sense, mind-numbingly difficult though it can seem.

Secondly they discovered that in order to do justice to their religious experience they had to use the same sort of language of the force that was a part of that experience, and to which they could only give the name of “Holy Spirit”.

Thirdly, they discovered that in making these two moves they did not lose that faith in the oneness of God that their Scriptures proclaimed to them; rather it was deepened, and at the same time it drove them outwards, to proclaim that God, in oneness and threeness, to an unbelieving or indifferent world (not unlike our own), and (because of the rich mystery of God) to reach out in love to the rest of humanity.

So let us look at the three readings that you have just heard in the light of this rich mystery. Our first reading, from the Book of Proverbs, comes from a Jewish, not a Christian hand; and it shows already an awareness of the

mystery of love, and tries to speak of how God's love can reach out to the created world, the infinite creator to his very finite creatures. The way the reading does this is to use the figure of Wisdom, who utters her invitation. Wisdom is close to God and yet not identical to God. Wisdom is created, and yet there with God in the act of creation, assisting God, perhaps as a "master-workman", though it is hard to be sure of the translation of the Hebrew here. And, above all, Wisdom *rejoices*, in God, in creation, and in humanity. There is a hint, if you like, of the rich mystery of the love that is God.

In the second reading, Paul has finished that very difficult passage of argument in the first four chapters of Romans in which he has been trying to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles are in the same mess, and that the way out of the mess is what God has done in Jesus. Now he wants to show the Roman church what are the grounds for their confidence; and their confidence is to rest precisely on the rich mystery of God's love. He describes it as "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ", which gives us "access", a wonderful NT word for what God has done in Christ, access, as Paul says, "into this grace in which we stand and boast in the hope of the glory of God". And Paul then appeals to their (and our) experience: "the love of God is poured out into our hearts". How does this happen? Through this invisible, but to those early Christians quite unmistakable, force: "through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us". And we notice that Paul does not need to argue for it, so much was the Holy Spirit a part of their ordinary experience.

The third reading has Jesus, in that upper room, the night before he died. Outside there is darkness, and Judas has gone out into it. Inside, over this tiny and beleaguered group for whom Jesus has just dramatised the rich mystery of love by washing their feet, just like a slave, hangs the sad question, that hangs always over all Christians: “how can we survive without Jesus?” The answer, of course, is that we can’t, but nor, because of the rich mystery that we celebrate today, do we need to. Why? Because although Jesus still has, as he tells them, “much to say to you”, there is Another, to whom Jesus gives the name of “the Spirit of Truth, who will guide you in all Truth”. Why so? Because this Spirit, mysteriously, “will not speak of himself, but will speak whatever he hears. He will glorify me: anything the Father has is mine”. Do you see here the rich mystery of love? It looks away from the self towards the beloved.

And that is where we come in, you and I. For this mystery of the Holy Trinity that we celebrate today is not a theological riddle, to be sorted out in the library or in the pulpit. It is, as I have been saying, the mystery of love, that drives us out into our Monday morning world. Our task, tomorrow morning, is to proclaim, not so much by what we say as by the way we live with and react to others, the truth of the rich mystery that is the love of God, not to glorify ourselves, but because in pointing to God we actually discover and at the same time proclaim the truth that love is what matters.

Let me end on a personal note. Today, for reasons largely connected with the profitability of the greetings card industry, is Fathers’ Day, so greetings to all fathers here. But as it happens, this day, which is also Trinity Sunday, marks the 100th anniversary of my own father. He has been dead a good

many years now, 37 to be precise, for he died in the week in which I joined the Jesuits; but that is another story. He would be puzzled, I think, and more than a little embarrassed to hear me say this, but the way he lived that life that started a century ago today, his undemonstrative but unshakeable Catholic Christianity, his absolute integrity in professional life, and the unmistakable love that he radiated to his wife and children (along of course with all the flaws that are inextricably connected with the human condition) did what human beings do at their best, and proclaim the rich mystery of the love of God; and I should like now to do what I never did in his lifetime and publicly thank him for it.

And so to return to the beginning: it is a rich and difficult mystery, this of the loving God that is both one and three, but it is not conundrum for clever theologians, but something that you are called to take into your world, office, school, looking after children, whatever it is, and proclaim in your living that God is a rich community for which the only possible name is love.

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