

TRINITY SUNDAY
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[Trinity A]

There is a story about Albert Einstein, about when he was teaching at Oxford University in 1942. He had just finished giving his Physics students an exam. Afterwards, as he and his assistant were walking across the campus, his assistant asked him a question.

“Dr Einstein, this exam you’ve give to the senior class, isn’t that exactly the same exam you gave to the same class of students last year?”

“Yes,” said Einstein “exactly the same exam.”

“But, Dr Einstein, how could you do that?”

“Well,” said Einstein “the answers have changed!”

‘The Answers Have Changed’ !

What may be true for one age is not necessarily true for today. If we inhabit a new landscape, the questions might be the same but the answers may have changed.

Our church fathers sought and sometimes, fought, to answer two simple questions.

How is Jesus God ?

How is Jesus Christ ?

...the rest, as they say, is commentary,

...complex and confusing commentary, notwithstanding !

To we inhabitants of the twenty-first century, when it comes to the Trinity, the questions may be the same, but the answers have changed.

Here I want to say a brief word about the problem and limitations of language. Throughout this reflection whenever you hear the word ‘Trinity’ I trust that you *will* hear God, but when you hear the word ‘God’, you do *not* hear Trinity – for God is not a triangle !

Trinity can deliver us a lifeless orthodoxy, or a lifegiving spirituality.

The enormous social, political, cultural, and anthropological forces of the ancient world which convened the great church councils were the psychic furnaces out of which our creeds and Trinitarian language were forged. That struggle between the three great centres of Byzantium - Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria - Rome doesn’t get that much of a mention at this time - was reflected in those great church councils of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. Names like: Nicaea (325CE), Constantinople (381CE), Ephesus (431CE), Chalcedon (451CE), and back to Constantinople (543CE) again in the sixth century; the import of these great theological and philosophical contests are lost on us now - separated as we are by millennia of expansive human culture, thought and achievement. Although these ancient controversies and conversations will always remain relevant for us, part of our spiritual inheritance and providing fresh spiritual insight - we can feel baffled and confused by this ancient hermeneutic. Much of that ancient conversation seems a bit inaccessible to us now, because we inhabit a different psychic space. Applying Ockham’s razor for people of a consumerist age; the church, with its own peculiar theological dialect, has shown a wonderful capacity to ‘inoculate’ us against God. One of the few things I remember from my somewhat inauspicious theological education was that human beings can only ever hope to *apprehend*, not *comprehend*, God - the language we use for God can only ever be *ascriptive*, not *descriptive*. Trinity came to represent a whole new way of experiencing God – and I will judiciously avoid using the word ‘understand’.

There is hint of gospel light over the horizon.

We may be separated by time but we do *not* necessarily inhabit a different spiritual space to our forbears.

The 'Duck' Theology of Leunig!

Since I am a simple man, and as such ... I think that a lot can be learned about the Trinity by exploring the Good News according to Leunig - that the Trinity is like a duck !

In his lovely little book of cartoons, reflections and prayers titled *When I Talk to You: a Cartoonist Talks to God* he offers:

“A person kneels before a duck to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life, and offers thanksgivings and expressions of hope.

The person is praying.

The mind is on its knees.

This is the yearning of the spirit which leads to *love* and the *creative world*.”

By this beautiful image he tells us that our experience of God is, all at once, irrational and diffuse and divergent. I think that, by way of discussion, we ought to call our duck, 'Trinity'.

About this Leunig goes on to say...

““It is an absurd image just like the search for the sublime may sometimes have a ridiculous beginning. Kneeling before a duck is a clear depiction of irrational behaviour [and an important aspect of contemplative prayer.]

The act of kneeling symbolises humility... leaving behind power, stature, control, rationality, worldliness, pride and ego ... [obviously] a proud and upright human being cannot talk to a 'duck' ! Humbling oneself to become closer to the 'duck', more like the 'duck' and in this improve our chances of communicating with 'it'.

The 'duck' can symbolise many things: nature, instinct, feeling, beauty, innocence, the primal, the non-rational, [the immanent] and those deeply mysterious qualities that we attribute to a 'duck', which *coincidentally* and *remarkably*, we can attribute to the inner life of the one who kneels.

We may not be actually able to 'see' our inner 'duck' but we can feel its enormous impact on our lives.

Outwardly, disturbing and dramatic, its inner presence often wild and rebellious or elusive and difficult to grasp but we also know, that from this inner presence comes our love and fear, our creative spark, our music, our art, our very will to live.

A good relationship with this inner world leads to a good relationship with the world around us, any alienation seems to lead to great misery and loneliness... so joyful, so mysterious, so frightening. We are curious, we want a robust relationship, we want to trust, we want 'its' advice and the vitality it provides. [It has been said that virtue is coming into the vitality of God.] We are brought to a sense of meaning.

[Where property and wealth seem to count for more than human beings and their rights and wellbeing], this personal act is a social and political act because it reinforces that we are all interconnected – connection for its transforming and healing power.

But first of all, it's essential that we need to acknowledge the 'duck', its existence and integrity. This is not just an intellectual recognition but also a ritualistic poetic gesture, a respectful [and obedient] tribute carrying out this little ritual known simply as 'prayer'. In this is mystery.”

Trinity in the Twenty-First Century

Trinity, at essence, is about the inner and outer life of God.

The good news from Matthew is *not* a call to some kind of a formulaic Trinitarian God but *to a life of spiritual action*. It's about *making* disciples; *baptising in the name*; *teaching obedience* to everything that Jesus has commanded us; it's about *remembering* God is with us always, to the end of the age - all of these can *only* grow out of a healthy contemplative life, this is the 'action' that contemplatives are called to – as paradoxical as it sounds - otherwise our 'Trinity' will be too small.

"[We] believe in this spiritual dimension, this inner life, and [we] know that it can be strengthened by acknowledgement and by giving it a name." "*Names*", Eugene H Peterson reminds us "are important because they save us from undifferentiated generality". So we baptise in '*the*' name for this very reason - the Trinity is all about coming into the 'name' of God.

Trinity is about the kind of God whom we don't even recognise, never letting 'our left hand know what our right hand is doing', or when, 'the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink ... saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing ... we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

Here, surprisingly, in this experience of the unrecognised God we remain deeply embedded in God.

Trinity is about creative, redemptive and sanctifying Love and grace.

Trinity tells us that God *not* a noun - God is a verb.

Trinity tells us that God is not an idea but an encounter.

Trinity tells us that there is no such thing as a domesticated God.

Trinity, Richard Rohr tells us, is that God comes disguised as our life.

Trinity exposes us to the many faces of God: the diversity of God; the equity of God; the mystery and ineffability of God - the God within whom is the very dance of grace and love.

Trinity tells us that the human can be in divinity and divinity can be in humanity. As the church fathers expressed it, 'God became man so that man might become God.' Theosis is Trinity beckoning us into divinity. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin observed, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience."

Trinity tells us that the Christian life is never just *my* story, it is a community of stories [including those of the divine life]. I learn my story in company with God: some of which are Mother/Father stories, some of which are Jesus stories, and some of which are stories blown in on the wings of a dove, in the depths of the Spirit.

Trinity tells us that God made us in God's image but that the moment we think that we can make God in our image... we've stepped out of the party !

Trinity is about our deep connection both inner and outer.

Trinity tells us that we will always sit enshrouded under the wings of this warming and enlivening divine mystery.

And in the end...

Trinity tells us that we live our lives, in the cosmic interplay of God...

Attributions

Michael Leunig

When I Talk to You: a Cartoonist Talks to God ©2006

Eugene H Peterson

Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians ©1997

Readings

Exodus 34.1-8

- ¹ The Lord said to Moses, 'Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke.
- ² Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain.
- ³ No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.'
- ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.
- ⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord.'
- ⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
- ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'
- ⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped.

Song of the Three Young Men

Blessed are you, the God of our forebears:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Blessed is your holy and glorious name:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Blessed are you, glorious in your holy temple:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Blessed are you who behold the depths:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Blessed are you in the heights of heaven:
worthy to be praised and exalted for ever.

Song of the Three 29–34

2 Corinthians 13.11-13

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. ¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Matthew 28.16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'