

Trinity
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Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 6:1 - 8
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12 - 17
John 3:1 - 17

Trinity: an invitation to the relational dance of life

On Trinity Sunday it is possible to preach on the readings and never mention the Trinity. One reason for this is that the scriptures pre-date the 4th and 5th centuries, during which the Church's understanding of the mysterious nature of God was hammered out. Because of the times in which this was done, the language used is the fine hewn language of Greek philosophy, which we now have to work fairly hard to understand. The doctrine of One God in three persons seems cerebral - even nonsensical and yet is clearly important to Christian faith. If by now you are experiencing a sinking feeling, be encouraged by Thomas Hancock, a 19th century Anglican divine who said: *The rudest man or woman who cannot reason about the Trinity may know the Trinity more perfectly than ... a theologian who has learned by heart all the writings of St Athanasius or St Augustine, and all the controversies of the first six centuries.* What he meant is, the Trinity expresses a *relationship* of love and trust, which can be understood by someone who has not had the benefit of a certain type of education, or who may not be able to understand the idea.

The doctrine of the Trinity grew on the soil of deep reflection on scripture combined with the early Church's experience of God, made known in Jesus Christ. The early church worked very hard to find a way to name the unnameable: the Holy God who had addressed them, in the word of the Prophets, in the death and life of Jesus Christ, and in the unpredictable power of the Spirit. While it is true to say none of our readings names the Trinity, each one of them offers grist to the mill that makes this doctrine.

Isaiah's experience was that, in the concrete places and events of history, the holy God was revealed as being near at hand to address him and claim a relationship with him. This experience was awe inspiring and paralyzing for Isaiah. It uncovered his unworthiness, and exposed the unworthy context in which he lived. But paralysis was not the purpose of this encounter. God was on a mission to reconcile the people who had turned away from the covenant, and took action to release Isaiah from all impediments so that he could bear the words of grace to others. Isaiah's capacity for prophetic speech was a gift of God. The mission Isaiah engaged in flowed spontaneously from the One, high and lofty God, who claimed a relationship with him for the sake of the whole people of God.

Paul had a similar experience in which he found God to be near at hand, claiming a relationship with him and challenging him. In Romans Paul says it is the work of the Holy Spirit that brings this about. To cry "Abba - Father" is to use an expression of warm affection - closeness. The word "Father" does not mean "male deity" or "bloke", it means "intimate one" - the one who, in trust and love, stands close at hand. To be moved to cry "Abba" is to share everything with Jesus Christ, who cried "Abba" before us, and to claim that relationship now. For Paul, all this does not come by way of our

knowledge or skill, it is a gift. “Abba - Intimate one” is Paul’s way of naming a relationship of grace in which he found himself known by God, and in which he in turn chose to live.

In John we encounter Nicodemus whose human speech about God seems to stumble and falter. Nicodemus knew enough to realise that what was in Jesus came from God. He was a learned man but, faced with Jesus who spoke to him of things “above” - and of the unpredictable, uncontrollable power of the Spirit, Nicodemus could not grasp that the power to enter the realm of the Spirit comes from yielding life to the Spirit. Nicodemus came in the dark to find answers to his questions and he left in the dark, unable to accept the unimaginable gift of the new that Jesus offered him. What follows in John is a declaration of who God is and what God does for us. God LOVED the world so much that he SENT his son and GAVE him so that the world might be gathered into God again. Nicodemus had not grasped that God refuses to accept a world bent on living only for itself, and seeks to call it back to the source of its life. God keeps reaching out, offering a redemptive relationship in which we may find ourselves at home.

Together, the texts refer to God, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ. What the Trinity declares is that what is in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is the same thing manifest in different forms. If we were writing the doctrine today we might move away from metaphysical speculation and say that the three aspects of God we experience in life have the same genetic code: their inner pattern is exactly the same, even though they come to us in different forms. In the eighth century, St John of Damascus said that while each person in the Trinity was distinct, it also blended with each other to form a dynamic unity of communion (*perichoresis*). John of Damascus saw it more like a dance but later theology emphasised the mutual indwelling of the Trinity - diminishing some of the dynamic sense. Following John we would say that God is not something sterile and static - wrapped up in himself. God is engaged in a dance of life, and is in the business of seeking us out to dance with him. This we see in its clearest form in Jesus Christ, to whose life and work we are joined by the power of the Holy Spirit. The love of God is oriented to life with us. God is for us. And God seeks reconciliation and communion with us in order that we might have the fullness of life that comes from fellowship with our Creator. That is what is meant by salvation and eternal life. This is what is expressed in the sacrament of Baptism, in which we are joined to Jesus Christ, and the Lord’s Supper, through which he continues to feed us with his life.

Stephen Beavans, the key speaker at a conference on Mission held in Melbourne last year, told us of a sculpture titled *The Joy of Life (Joie de vivre)*, a photograph of which hangs on his study wall. He regards it as an image of the Trinity. The sculpture depicts three figures, rather abstract and clearly female, caught up in the ecstasy of dancing. In the sculpture one figure holds one hand if each but the circle is not closed. Rather, it seems that the open space is an invitation for others to join in the dance themselves. A self-contained God, a closed divine society, would not be true to the God we know. The God we know is a dynamic trinity of openness, who gives life to us and invites us to share.

A similar point is made in the Icon by Rublev, which appears on our Order of Service. The three angels came offering **life** to Abraham and Sarah, and this involved ongoing communion with God. In this Icon there is a space for the reader at the table, because the underlying meaning is that there is a place for us: together we are made whole.

The Trinity is a piece of ancient philosophy. It witnesses to God who is a community at mission who leaves a place open for us. The rudest person may understand this, because they may be able to live, receptive to the call of God, who invites us to the dance of life.

The most intelligent and learned may have all the arguments about the Trinity down pat, but if that makes the Trinity into a closed system, a secret code for the elite, a weapon that denies others the fellowship to which God has invited them, then the whole point of this has been missed. What God is implies something about the way we are meant to be in response. A relational God seeks to create a relational people, and the right function of our doctrines is to serve that end.