

**Trinity**  
**30/5/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Proverbs 8:1 – 4, 22 - 31**

**Psalm 8**

**Romans 5:1 - 5**

**John 16:12 - 15**

**Do you believe in God's circulating love? Yes I do!**

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As Trinity Sunday comes round each year it seems to offer a challenge: how to talk about a doctrine rather than a story of our salvation. If we were meeting fifteen hundred years ago, we would be keeping this day as the "eighth day of the Pentecost" and would still be reflecting on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Since the Middle Ages this has been named Trinity Sunday and is a day when we pause to reflect on what we know about God. Val Webb is an Australian author who recently won an award for religious writing with her book *Like Catching Water in a Net: human attempts to describe the Divine*. I haven't read the book but the title evokes the idea of how hard it is to speak about transcendent realities, and no less a figure than Rowan Williams once said: "in some ways there is not much to go on". One of the key ways the Church says what it knows about God is through the doctrine of the Trinity.

An explicit doctrine of the Trinity is not found in scripture. The foundation is present in the writings of Paul, as we have heard today, in the formula for Blessings and Greetings found in his other writings, and in Jesus' Baptismal command at the end of Matthew. When the church came to the point where it wanted to clarify and write down what it knew about God, it chose to use the language of Greek philosophy rather than the biblical narratives. Whenever we set out to discuss the Trinity we are stretched between Greek philosophical concepts in which the doctrine was clarified and the picture language of the salvation-history of the Bible, which is more accessible to most people. In actual fact both language forms are picture language, and neither one is able to comprehend God better than the other. As it happens, in worship, we listen to the picture language of the Bible, and then we join in affirming our faith in the picture language of the Creeds. Both of these are symbolic rather than literal, because they point beyond themselves to a greater reality that is, even so, described as concretely as it is possible to do so, in words.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not spun out of thin air. It was the conclusion about God Christians came to based on their experience of faith in Christ, and expressed in their worship and mission conducted in his name. The formulation of the doctrine was given great impetus by the challenges and threats the Early Church faced in sharing its understanding of faith in a multicultural world. We know how difficult it is to speak about God. It is much easier to speak about Jesus, although if we have truly grasped the meaning of our faith, we have not changed subject in doing so.

When seeking to talk about the Trinity, Christians have often resorted to the farewell discourses in John's Gospel. These contain very fluid language that conveys the sense of *God's circulating love*. What is in God is in Jesus and what is in Jesus is in God and the Spirit, who comes from God, makes this relationship clear to us. We came across this in the Gospel today. Jesus tells us that when the Spirit comes "it will not speak on its own", meaning it will speak for God. And when the Spirit speaks,

Jesus says, it will “glorify me and take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:14). What this means is that the Spirit carries a message to us about who Jesus is for us. And it does not stop there, Jesus says: “All that the Father has is mine” (Jn 16:15a). That is to say the work of the Spirit is to make clear that everything in God is in Jesus: he is God for us.

The direction in which the language flows here shows that conclusion is not something we dreamed up: this is something that is revealed to us as a gift from God. Paul’s thoughts in Romans 5 support this conclusion. He says the Holy Spirit, the earmark of the end time, has been unleashed amongst us to deliver a gift: it “pours into our hearts” the knowledge of God’s love for us. If we can claim tangible evidence of God’s love, it will be because something has happened in our experience that we did not evoke or instigate, it was given to us. This event delivers to us the deepest assurance that Christ is the agent in whom it has been demonstrated that God has chosen to make peace with us.

The remarkable thing about having to spend this time reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity is that instead of taking us away from the story of our salvation to talk about abstract philosophical concepts, it is possible to do this through the picture language of scripture. There we see that the key to the story is the circulation of God’s love, which moves within God. In Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it has been allowed to circulate in the world, so that we are drawn in to receive a share of the divine life.

Today we are going to say the Apostles’ Creed. As you know, this is the Baptismal Creed of the church. Following ancient practice we use it at Baptism, Confirmation, and at the reaffirmation of Baptismal vows. This creed sets out the convictions we want people to articulate when they seek to identify themselves with the living tradition of the church. On those occasions each of the three affirmations is preceded by a question: Do you believe in God, who made you and loves you/...in Jesus Christ your Saviour and Lord/ ...the Holy Spirit and the continuing work of your salvation?

The danger of speaking about the Trinity is that it introduces us to the complexity of language and it is possible to create the impression that only those with a facility with words can have faith. At a service of Confirmation one of the candidates was a person with an intellectual impairment for whom even standing up in public was a challenge. She struggled with the wording of each affirmation. In reply to the question: “Do you believe in God, who made you and loves you?” she responded loudly and clearly: “Yes I do!” And so it proceeded: “Yes I do!”

The reason why this deviation from normal practice is totally acceptable, and humbling to hear is this: belief in the Trinity is belief in a relationship that we enter into, rather than the capacity to articulate statements such as the “*economic Trinity is the same as the imminent Trinity and vice versa*”. Belief in the Trinity does not mean we have grasped God like water in a net, only to have God slip away. Faced with the question of whether we have faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the reply “Yes, I Do!” is enough. It means we own that God has grasped us and poured his circulating love into our hearts. And it means we have chosen to live with that energy as the empowering centre of our life.

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