

St Mary Magdalen

Trinity Sunday 2008

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

There is a nice little spot at the bottom of my garden which I have laid out like one of those rock gardens you see next to Buddhist temples in Japan. I have never been to Japan but I have seen the pictures. On the left is a water feature and on the right three rocks. In the summer I sometimes sit there and meditate on the water of life and the Rock of our salvation. Why, then, you may ask do I have three rocks instead of one big Rock? There is a simple answer to that question and a more complicated one. The simple answer is that they don't sell big rocks in B&Q, only ones that you can manage to lift at the checkout. The more complicated answer is the subject of my sermon.

The trouble with the Trinity is that it isn't just one thing, even less three things, it is the answer that Christians have given to a whole range of different questions, and it is quite useful to separate out the questions and consider them one by one and try to show how it is that they all seem to point to the same conclusion. The readings this morning help us to do this.

The First was Isaiah's vision in the Temple. His vision was the answer to the question "How great is God?" The prophet standing in the Temple thinks of earthly worship as merely the outer edge of God's glory; the place is filled with just the train of his robe, and he follows it up in his mind's eye to heaven to see how great God is. The faith of Israel, almost unique in antiquity, was that there is only one God and Israel's Temple was a rather stark and empty place. Does that mean that monotheism is a bit boring, that heaven is a rather dull place with nothing much going on - compared with other religions at the time with their pantheons of deities all enjoying themselves? No. Quite the contrary. There is plenty of excitement in the throne room of the one true God; it is busy with seraphs and cherubs and angels flying about, for the Lord is the Lord of Hosts and heaven is crowded with God's greatness. And all cry: "Holy, Holy, Holy" - that is a perfect and complete holiness, a threefold fullness of divine Glory.

The Author of Revelation also asks himself the same question in chapter 4, "How great is God?" But he could no longer stand in the Jerusalem Temple to get his reply; it was a heap of rubble in his day. Instead he imagines himself carried up into heaven itself to peer through the open door and see into the very presence of God. One seated on a throne dazzling like a jewel about whom reverence demands that no more be said; before the throne are seven flames of fire, the seven spirits of God. Around it are four living creatures taken over from old prophecy but purified, representing the whole creation: wild and domestic animals, birds and humankind. No fish because there is no sea in heaven. (Notice that humans do not exclusively rule the roost in the worship of the new creation) And God shares thrones with twenty four elders, twelve perhaps for Israel and twelve for the Gentile world. The author of Revelation has not Christianised Isaiah's vision too quickly. He has postponed till the next chapter the appearance of the Lamb of God, the visible loving image of the unseen God. For the moment he is content to gaze in adoration at the greatness of the same God that Isaiah worshipped. Can you tell where

divinity ends and non-divinity begins in this vision? How great is God, numerically speaking? I reckon, one on the throne, 7 spirits, 4 animals, 24 elders; that is 36 but only one God; and the tally continues, the Lamb, the persecuted mother, the two witnesses, the Bride and the Spirit: eight more; that makes 42 – Trinity times 14. So to the first question: “How great is God?” the answer is “Greater than you can ever imagine”

A different kind of question, equally huge, is posed by the Gospel today: basically it is “What is the meaning of life? - where are we going and who decides the destination?” Nicodemus approaches Jesus with the words “Rabbi, we know that you are a Teacher sent from God”. He stays, thereby, within the limits of a sound Jewish monotheism, but he is obviously angling for a discussion about Christology. Nevertheless Jesus answers with something more personally challenging. “Unless you are born again you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” The simple answer to the question of life’s purpose (too simple I’m afraid for an academic like Nicodemus) is that human beings must be reborn as children of God, conformed to the image of God and recreated by water and the Spirit. God’s purpose is to make his creatures his adopted children; he has always had this purpose and is bound to succeed in it. So, strange as it may seem, we have to find a place for ourselves in our conception of God. But human finitude and sin forbid that we should divinise ourselves. So what we do instead, when we discover in the life of Jesus the model of what human life ought to be and in the Spirit the experience of union with God, is to incorporate these into the Godhead in our place. The answer to the question posed by the Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and wanted to know what life is about, is the Trinity.

This raises a further question: “How can Christ be divine if God is One?” How can a recently crucified Galilean carpenter and teacher be consubstantial with eternal deity? That is a huge question. Perhaps we could start on an answer by saying this. Jesus of Nazareth did not reveal God merely in his words about God - his amazing and beautiful words concerning the love and justice of God’s kingdom - other prophets have said similar things before and since. Jesus did more: he embodied what he said in what he was. He wielded the power of God in his healings and the saving weakness of God in the Cross and he was raised on the third day as the first fruits of Resurrection Life. The early Christians did not divinise a human being, rather they recognised in Jesus the humanity of God. And this had two major consequences, as I see it: first worship of this God was no longer just adoration, it now became a kind of empathy, identification with him and incorporation into his Body in Baptism and Eucharist; and secondly since the humanity of God transcends all distinctions of race, nationality, class and gender, faith in Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, effectively universalised Judaism, and made Israel’s God accessible to everyone in the world.

And what of the Holy Spirit? “Is the Spirit in the Church really from God?” Or to spell out this question in practical terms: Does Baptism make any difference? Do the clergy have the authority of the Spirit to forgive sins? Is the bread and wine on this altar really to become the body and blood of Christ by the operation of the Spirit? Is there anyone there when I pray? Is scripture inspired? Are there any genuine saints? All these sceptical questions crowd in and the answer to them all is that wherever the effect of God is truly felt, God is there. The Spirit is not a secondary, mediated, diluted, half-divine reality. The Spirit is coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son. God is immanent

as well as transcendent and incarnate. The doctrine of the Trinity is Christianity's refusal to allow God to be pushed to the margin of the world into faint traces of divinity. It insists rather that God is everywhere colonising the world, coming at it from all directions at the same time, luring it into love and holiness.

[I realise this sermon is a bit on the heavy side; what do you expect on Trinity Sunday?]

I only have time for one last question: "What is God really like?" - apart from worship, apart from salvation, apart from the earthly life of Jesus and the fellowship of Holy Spirit in the Church. What is God like, before all worlds and apart from the creation? God is one, certainly - but God is not a lonely, isolated individual. A concept of God that is too strictly monotheistic is a bit naïve, and even oppressive; it can become a projection of the human lust for absolute power, leading to fanaticism, as it has in the history of many religions including our own. But God's power is Trinitarian; it is power-sharing in a community of love. Love is impossible without community; God cannot be the eternal lover unless there is an eternal beloved. The Father and the Son are mutually defined by their relationship, but not mutually limited by it, for the relationship, the Spirit that unites them, enhances it yet further. With God, effect cannot be any less divine than being.

The Trinity is a symbol of a profound truth which anyone can appreciate, even if they are not particularly religious: that we are more truly ourselves when we are taken out of ourselves in love. God in himself has more unity and integrity than any one of us; and more relatedness and love than any two of us; and since the relatedness is no less God than the love and desire that generates and inspires it, there must be three persons in the Godhead.

QED, one is tempted to add, wrapping up the subject neatly. But against such arrogance, we do well finally to remember what St Augustine said after finishing the last of fifteen volumes of his great work on the Trinity: "If you understand it, it is not God."

And to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and for ever.

Amen