

## The Challenge of the Trinity, Trinity Sunday 2004

### Intro

- Film clip nuns on the run. Robbie Coltrane is a gangster on the run posing as a nun in a Convent. Teaches a class of girls about the Trinity and remembers the shamrock. God is like the shamrock small, green and split three ways.

A good reminder that when we talk about God we can very often talk nonsense. And that while all our talk about God is symbol, analogy and metaphor we ought not to push any of them too far. But just because they're difficult we shouldn't dispense with or ignore doctrinal formulations as tempting as that might be. I do want to talk to you about Trinity and how we might make sense of it as profoundly pointing to the nature of God as love.

### I The economy of love

The idea of God as Trinity developed over the early centuries not as some mad speculative symbol but Christians' way of making sense of their experience of God being at work in Jesus.

By seeing God's presence in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the old notions of who God was and how one talked about him broke down. Language got stretched until it broke and arguments raged for decades about the precise ways in which God could be said to be at work in the Son. But the dynamic which came to fruition at Nicea in 325 AD when the words of our creed were agreed was to affirm that in Jesus Christ we see the Son of God - a Son who is truly and fully God', God from God, light from light, true God from true God' and not something less than God, or simply superhuman. 'of one being with the Father'. And so also with the Spirit.

### II The story of God, the economy of love

Now I think this is tremendously puzzling and tremendously exciting. Puzzling because one plus one plus one doesn't equal three but you guessed it one. An early Church Father<sup>(1)</sup> said 'in answer to those who upbraid us for tritheism, let it be said that we worship one God, one not in number but in nature.'

(1) Evagrius. See JND Kelly p 269

But also exciting because inasmuch as it obscures maths it reveals something to us about the rather different economy of Love.

For it is love, then relationship is intrinsic to God, of his very essence – if it weren't so God would be unrequited longing or unrequited giving. But instead the doctrine of the Trinity discloses that the ability to give and receive love is of God's very essence. The Father cannot exist in isolation but from eternity is in relationship with the Son. And what's more, it's a love which overflows beyond the two into a third: the Spirit. The Father and the Son aren't locked into some sort of narcissistic exclusive union, instead their love is perpetually open and creative. It pours out into the Spirit – which proceeds from the Father and the Son and from which creation itself springs as a sign and product of this excess of love and joy.

And the defining mark of this Trinitarian way of being and loving is the absolute distinctiveness of each person and yet their identity, their oneness. One of the most illuminating slants on the Trinity comes from some thinkers who reflected after the Council of Nicea. For them:

‘Everything that the Father is, is seen in the Son, and everything that the Son is belongs to the Father. The Son in His entirety abides in the Father, and in return possesses the Father in entirety in Himself. [Basil, quoted Kelly P.264]

It's as though the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are involved in some eternal self-giving and hospitable dance, with each one stepping into the place of the other, being received and pouring themselves out at the same time, yet always maintaining their uniqueness and fullness. It's divine love making characterised by the creativity, unity, transcendence and otherness. Love and life constantly overflowing while never being exhausted. It's an image of the Trinity which is at odds from the patriarchal and static image of the old man with a beard in the sky which we still cling to and which has shorn up rather than challenged hierarchies and systems of power which oppress rather than liberate.

### III – Conclusion

I had lunch with a friend very recently who told me she was beginning to move away from her church to a more fundamentalist church. What she valued about her new church was the challenge. Where before she had appreciated the sense of blessing and affirmation she received, she now responded to the message being preached (in considerably longer sermons) that her life needed sorting out. That prayer mattered and that putting Jesus at the centre of her life was necessary if she was going to save her soul.

I'm pleased for her, but saddened too, because I think sometimes we stand in danger of failing to communicate the need for our lives to be turned upside down and changed by God, and the importance of attending to our salvation as the chief purpose of this life.

The language of the creed has a poetry about it and a dignity which can make us feel quite holy when reciting it. But even if we're speaking metaphor or analogy nothing should obscure the fact that Trinitarian love is bloody difficult.

This Trinitarian economy of love or oikumene is the pattern for human living and loving. In our era I believe Christians are being called on to think about and live more deeply what it means to be a church – to love in this way. For our own sake and for the world.

We can't do it in our own strength. The only way this love can be known in us is through a total immersion in the love of God. The dynamic of the Trinity is to flood out and return again to flow out once more. We need urgently to return to the source again and again, to be rooted and placed there.

I can think of no greater challenge. It's tough, it means the death of that false idol the ego to rise with Christ into the true life of God, moving beyond the symbol into the mystery itself, into the love of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen