

Holy Communion (Romans 5.1-5 & John 16.12-15)

Trinity Sunday

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According to the great 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 -1804), '*the doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value, even if one claims to understand it; still less when one is convinced that it far surpasses our understanding... As far as Kant was concerned this doctrine offered 'absolutely no guidance for conduct.'*

I must confess there was a time when I dreaded preaching on Trinity Sunday. I was with Kant on this. I could accept it as a key Christian doctrine, but to speak meaningfully about the Trinity felt beyond my capacity. That was *before* I returned to St Mark's National Theological Centre to do further study - which turned out to be transformative. The opening subject I did was titled *Theology, Church and Ministry* and the first assignment, a book review. We were given a list of titles to choose from and somewhat sceptically I choose *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* by English theologian Colin Gunton. The *promise* of Trinitarian Theology, I thought, what could that possibly be?? I was dubious but also intrigued.

I've got to say, it was a difficult read - getting my head around his vocabulary and writing style was hard enough - but I persevered (because I had to!!) and it proved well worth the effort. By the end of the book I was excited and inspired! 'In the light of the *Trinity* everything looks different', Gunton claimed in the Introduction and after reading his book, I agreed! It was as if I'd been in a dark cave and someone had lit a match, and suddenly I saw things I didn't know were there. So, what came into view that so excited me about what had been for me a dry and dusty doctrine?

What I suddenly saw was that God was fundamentally dynamic and relational. As a card-carrying monotheist, I'd always stressed the oneness of God. I knew that God was a Trinity - 'three-in-one'; but the emphasis had always been on *oneness*. Apparently, and some would argue unfairly, this emphasis traces back to Augustine, and philosophical assumptions that influenced his thinking. What I realised reading Gunton's book was that this didn't do justice to the biblical revelation and historical experience of God. In its desire to uphold God's singular sovereignty, in a world in which people worshiped all

sorts of idols, the church (certainly in the West) all but overlooked the sense of God as being-in-relation, as holy communion. Yet, in the Christian vision, God is essentially relational - Trinitarian; there is no substance of God beneath or apart from the persons of the godhead - the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is equally *three-in-one* and *one-in-three*. The Gospel and letters of John perhaps say this most succinctly - 'God is love'. Love is no abstract thing - it's fundamentally relational. Self-giving sociality, joyful, generous, generative hospitality and exchange is the nature of God's being and not some secondary layer or attribute. God doesn't just 'do' love - God **is** love.

When you think about it, this is how God acts in history and is portrayed in Scripture. In the story of creation - the Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos, attending, calling life into existence and delighting - 'and behold it was very good!'; in the story of Jesus and of Pentecost... it's all lovingly self-giving and participatory. Father, Son and Holy Spirit dynamically engaged to awaken and draw us into divine life. '*We have peace (we are justified, reconciled, brought back into relationship) with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*', Paul writes, in Romans (5.1)... '*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*' (5.5). In this generously self-giving outpouring of love, '*God gives us the gift of God's own life*' (Tanner 2010:i). Baptism is a symbol of being immersed '*in the middle of the love and delight of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*', Rowan Williams writes in his little book *Being Christian* (2014:7); an abundant love and delight which, even as it draws us inwards into divine intimacy, flows outwards and into the world.

As I saw this more clearly, I began to see other connections and why they matter theologically. If we are created and redeemed, *by communion for communion*, then it matters that we recognise the inter-relatedness of all life and its implications for our way of being in the world; it matters that we tend and care for all of creation, especially ecosystems and species, communities and persons that are threatened and suffering. This is not some 'lefty' agenda - it's a theological imperative. If we are created and redeemed by love for love, then it matters that we work for peace and reconciliation - that we seek to forgive those who hurt us, to remain in conversation with those we don't like or understand; that we seek to build bridges not walls between tribes, nations, communities, generations, genders and social groups. To participate in the dynamic of

divine life, ‘*the ecstatic joy of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*’, means to live from and bring that reality into the heart of the world’s pain. (Williams 2014:7).

When you see it like this, then contrary to Kant, the doctrine of the Trinity is of *immense* practical value. Indeed, this doctrine provides us with our *fundamental* orientation and guide for conduct. And wait there’s more! It’s not just that it offers a guide to conduct - it changes also the way we see ourselves. Our culture affirms independence, self-sufficiency, individualism - ‘I did it my way’!! Many in our society assume that we dwell in an impersonal, dog-eat-dog universe and that this justifies making competition, rivalry, the drive to get ‘ahead’ and look after ‘number one’ the foundation of economics, politics, and social life. But trinitarian theology affirms a reality altogether different - connectedness, mutuality, interdependence. It reminds us that we are relational beings held in a dynamically relational universe, created *by* Communion for communion. ‘We’re all in this together’.

And, when you think about it, that’s what we’ve discovered is true; our sense of ‘self’, our identity is formed and sustaining *in community*, through relationships – with parents, siblings, friends, teachers, ministers, and so on. As psychology has made us acutely aware, the quality of our relationships largely determines the degree to which we develop a healthy sense of self. If relations are inhospitable (particularly our earliest relations) we struggle with inadequacy, insecurity and insufficiency, we struggle to cope and flourish in life. Likewise, healing becomes possible as we are embraced in patient, caring communities. There is an ‘ecology of life’; poet Mary Oliver speaks of the profoundly healing significance of coming to know our place in ‘the family of things’.

That’s why, in trinitarian theology we speak of persons, not individuals. When the early church Fathers and Mothers used the term ‘person,’ (whether of the persons of the godhead or of human beings) they were referring to a ‘distinct identity’ that only makes sense in the context of relationship. It is not good for us to be alone (cf. Gen 2). Solitude - yes; for solitude enhances communion. But isolation - no; *persons* cannot exist in isolation, out of relation with other people, with the natural world and its creatures, and with God. Apart from these relationships, we diminish and fragment.

Friends, the feast of Trinity celebrates a transformation in the way we know God, in the way we know ourselves and our world. In the Christian imagination, God cannot be conceived apart from Jesus and the Holy Spirit, cannot be conceived except as an

endlessly generative relationship of self-giving love in whose life we too are called to share. This God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation', Paul writes in Corinthians (2 Cor 5.18). So, while the doctrine of the Trinity can sound somewhat removed from reality and the struggles of our daily life, in truth it's a statement **of** reality, a dynamic, vibrant, relational reality, abundant love and life at the heart of all things. That's something to get excited about. It makes all the difference in the world and gives us the vocation of a lifetime.

References

Gunton, C (1991) *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T&T Clark, London.

Kant, I (1979) *The Conflict of the Faculties*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Tanner, K (2010) *Christ the Key*, Cambridge University Press.

Williams, R (2014) *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, SPCK London.

16 Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. 17 For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! Romans 5:1 Many manuscripts let us. Romans 5:2 Or let us. Romans 5:3 Or let us. Cross references. Romans 5:1 : S Ro 4:25. Romans 5:1 : S Ro 3:28. Romans 5:1 : S Lk 2:14. Romans 5:1 : ver 10. Romans 5:2 : Eph 2:18; 3:12. Romans 5:2 : 1Co 15:1. Romans 5:2 : S Heb 3:6. Romans 5:3 : S Mt 5:12. Romans 5:3 : S Heb 10:36. John 15:16: Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. John 15:17: These things I command you, that ye love one another. John 15:18: If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.