

The mystery of God

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President Obama's long-awaited speech in Cairo seems not to have disappointed. It has been hailed for his trademark eloquence, but also for his breadth of purpose: the bridging of the divide between Islam and the West. Nowhere was his effort to acknowledge the Arab world more dramatic than in the long section of the speech on Palestine-Israel. How appropriate for Christians that the speech should have been given at the beginning of the week that the WCC has asked its churches to observe as a World Week for Peace in Palestine-Israel.

It is now more than 60 years since the partition of Palestine hardened into a permanent nightmare for Palestinians. It is more than 40 years since the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza overwhelmed the peaceful vision of one land, two peoples, three religions. In his speech, the President acknowledged these realities more clearly, and spoke more even-handedly, than any of his predecessors, recognising the legitimate Palestinian aspirations for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own.

The WCC-led Week is dedicated to prayer, education and advocacy for an end to this 60-year old conflict. During this Week peace prayers will be read aloud at local sites of suffering—near settlements, at demolished homes, at checkpoints, in refugee camps and in parishes and schools in the West Bank and Gaza. Churches on every continent around the world will also make use of the prayers. It is also a way of raising people's awareness and encouraging action. It is a way of holding up the need for change, for transformation in human hearts and relationships.

A journalist began his article in the paper on Friday with his favourite Middle East joke. He said he told it to the President before he left for Cairo.

There is this very pious Jew named Goldberg who always dreamed of winning the lottery. Every Sabbath, he'd go to the synagogue and pray: "God, I have been such a pious Jew all my life. What would be so bad if I won the lottery?" But Goldberg wouldn't win. Week after week he would pray. Finally, one Sabbath, Goldberg wails: "God, I have been so pious for so long; what do I have to do to win the lottery?" The heavens parted and the voice of God was heard: "Goldberg, give me a chance! Buy a ticket!"

The journalist said he told the President the joke, because everyone seemed to be telling him what he needed to do and say in Cairo, but nobody was indicating how they were going to step up and do something different. Everyone wants peace but nobody wants to buy a ticket. It is another way of saying that what is required is the transformation of our human nature, where our vision of who we are and how we are to live becomes re-oriented, so that relationships—the way we treat each other as human beings—becomes transformed. That is also the invitation of this day.

Today we come to church to celebrate Trinity Sunday! The doctrine of the Trinity must be the most peculiar, bizarre, yet most precious, insight into the nature of God and of us as human beings, that Christian faith has brought to the world.

Trinity Sunday! It comes around each year after we have sought again to re-live—to re-call, to make real for ourselves—the life of Jesus whose disciples we seek to be. Each year, the cycle begins for us as Christians with the season of Advent and all its anticipation. It continues into the great seasons of Christmas and Epiphany. Then comes the Lenten pilgrimage—culminating with our walk with Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross through Holy Week to Good Friday. We are surprised all over again by the transforming new (resurrection)

life God brings and our hope is re-kindled throughout the great season of Easter. We know the truth of Jesus' promise that he will not leave us alone as we celebrate the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost—the divine presence, which constantly sustains, empowers and re-creates, in which we live and move and have our being.

The remainder of the year provides us with the time for re-calling and reflecting more and more on the life of Jesus and its implications for our lives, our faith community, and our world. But before we do, the cycle of the Church's year invites us on this day to pause and to ponder the mystery of God.

On this day—Trinity Sunday—that really is all we can do: ponder the mystery—the source—of existence that we name 'God'.

That is not to say that we do not try to understand, even explain, this profound mystery. Theologians attempt to explain for us an understanding of God that defies explanation or analysis. In earlier centuries, the Church tore itself apart trying to achieve accuracy in verbal expressions of its belief about this great mystery, trying to ensure everyone thought the same thing and the right thing about the nature of God.

The problem is, of course, our words are so inadequate. The bishops at two quite formative Councils in Christian history were attempting to put into words, into propositions and doctrinal statements, an experience that is probably best captured in myths and symbols. The danger with the words and propositions is that we can be so caught up in them that we miss the experience they are meant to evoke. The experience is everything, the words by themselves are nothing.

That is why our worship needs to be not just words, but song and ceremony and other kinds of symbols that do not depend on words—for all are vehicles by which we can glimpse—experience—just something of the mystery. The experience is everything, the words by themselves are nothing.

The experience, that Trinity invites us into, is the turbulent transformation of our human nature, where our vision of who we are and how we are to live becomes re-oriented and we recognise God is not 'out there' but is within us—as love, peace and hope. We come to see that our task as human creatures is to live out of this divinity within, out of love, peace and hope. It is our own transformation and the way for transformation of the world.

'Trinity' is an insight into the very being of God. It arose out of the lived experience of the early church: the experience of God who is Creator, of God who is redeemer, and of God who is sustainer—the experience of God who loves, of God who is the object of that love, and of God who is the very loving itself.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that at the heart of all reality, at its very heart there is love, community, relationship—Father, Son and Spirit—depicted in icons as the Holy Three seated together at table, regarding each other with the steady gaze of lovers, sharing food and talk, and holding each other in perpetual awareness, the awareness of love, love that is given and received and honoured. This love within God can also be understood as God's holiness, God's otherness. Isaiah glimpsed it in his vision of the glory of God, and expressed it—expressing the inexpressible!—in terms of beauty and colour and splendour and light of awesome intensity.

The love within God is what God invites us to become part of—our being made daughters and sons of God who share Jesus' relationship with God, who share in the divine life. God invites us to share in this love which is the centre of all reality and the centre of our own reality—and coming to share it is new birth. We are to be born into the love of God, and

it remakes us because we understand ourselves and God and life in an entirely different way that is liberating. This extraordinary love, uncontrollable, uncontainable like the wind! It remakes us in the deepest places of who we are. Apart from this love we are only half-alive—then we live with no broader perspective and no deeper resources than ourselves, and that simply is not enough!

The idea of Trinity can sound like a theological abstraction, something that really has nothing to do with life, real life, at all. But this idea has things to say about us, about how we live, about us as a church, about our life together, about our life as people within the whole world community.

Trinity places at the heart of all reality—love, community, relationship, a love that seeks to draw others into the experience of love. So Isaiah is touched with the burning coal, touched on his lips, and he becomes whole, and his healing releases his power to hear God and to respond.

In a World Week for Peace—for a just and peaceful resolution of an injustice that must be the greatest cause of violence in the world—there is a great need for healing, for relationships to be touched into wholeness, for respect of one another's dignity because of the God within each one.

Today, Trinity Sunday, we come to see that our task as human creatures is to live out of this divinity within, out of love, peace and hope. It is our own transformation and the way for transformation of the world.

Trinity is about the mystery of God. But it says to us that at the heart of God is love, and we are invited to share the love, to live it, to be the visible expression of it. How do we understand the Trinity? How, indeed! In the same way we understand God totally identified with a man on a cross inviting us to share the life of God, the life of Love.