

FATHER SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction

I am reliably told that in the guidebook to the ruins of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire the following explanatory entry accompanies a picture of the Chapter House: “Here in the Chapter House the monks gathered every Sunday to hear a sermon from the Abbot except on Trinity Sunday, owing to the difficulty of the subject.”¹

If only...!

Having journeyed from Christmas through to Pentecost we are left with a question: How shall we talk of God? How shall we talk of the world?

As we can see from the modern world and its conflicts how we speak of God is very important. Reflect on the god of Islamist terrorists or violent Christian anti-abortionists.

Heinrich Himmler is a good example:

“Which of us wandering through the lovely German countryside and coming unawares upon a crucifix does not

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Living hope in a changing world*, London: Alpha International, 2003, p.12

feel deep in his heart...a strange but enduring sense of shame? The gods of our ancestors were different. They were men, and carried in their hands a weapon which typified the natural characteristics of our race, namely readiness to get and self-reliance. How different is yonder pale figure on the Cross, whose passivity and emphasised mien of suffering express only humility and self-abnegation, qualities which we, conscious of our heroic blood, utterly deny...The corruption of our blood, caused by the intrusion of this alien philosophy, must be ended."

Let me share with you a personal story.

A personal story

My first teaching appointment was at Ridley College, Melbourne, and required me to teach the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

I had no idea if the doctrine of the Trinity was an answer to anything important. I suspect that the Abbot of Fountains Abbey felt much the same way.

But in my later life as a missionary I faced two deep pastoral problems that required action and thought. One was how could I

speak to people about 'God is love.' A god who was a super solitary in the sky, even if split into three either couldn't love anything because it was beyond any such a sentiment or feeling, or it was so desperate for love it was pathological: it was like people we know who are starved of love they suck it out of others.

A second pastoral issue was this. How was it possible to give the good news teeth and by teeth I meant justice equity, peace, right social relations? We had inherited such an individualised Gospel that getting the individual to heaven seemed to be its only point. But why do that anyhow when all they would meet in heaven would be a love sucking solitary that demanded some kind of ritual worship forever?

This was the era of liberation theology and the final fling of Marxism as a political ideology in the late twentieth century. Liberation theology was a radical theology but it had to build on Marxism for its radical nature and not the gospel. It did that because the god of much of the Christianity it inherited was bereft of any interest in the poor, the world or anything else much about human beings except having a bad temper and wanting control.

Liberation theologians had to return to the Triune God of the Bible as opposed to the pagan gods often worshipped in church that

supported nationalism and the powerful (note Himmler above). They described themselves as ‘shameless (theological) conservatives.’ That made them social radicals:

“...the one thing the Christian revolutionaries advocate and defend is the adoration of the true (triune CGD) God in contrast to the adoration of idols which, for many centuries now, has been inculcated by a theology radically ignorant of the Bible.” (Jose Miranda)

What they discovered was that the self-loving moralistic Solitary was, in fact, a very socially conservative animal indeed, supporting the powerful and influential if it did anything at all. This was the theology I had read on the back of the toilet door-

‘God is not dead-he just doesn’t want to get involved.’

What understanding of God would give us a way of interpreting the world in favour of justice, equity, and peace? The long story would give us all mental cramp so here is the very short.

What I had to rediscover was that the NT talks about God by proclaiming *in story* the relationship of the F, the S and the Sp. And at the heart of that story is fellowship; communication, identity

and relationship entailing self-consciousness, self-awareness, thought and will.

As I said last week the whole Trinity is involved in every creative and redemptive act. No incarnation, no ministry, no cross, no resurrection no glorification, no coming kingdom no renewal of heaven and earth without the fellowship of the Trinity embedded there.

We see that in today's readings.

The pastoral and social implications of such being-in-relation, personhood defined as in-relation blows the mind. Love your enemies for starters; do good to those who hate you.

In the ancient world where it first came into being it was answer, a solution not a puzzle.

The struggle of the ancient world

The ancient world had lost confidence that it could ever resolve the fundamental flaws that were tearing it apart.

They thought that there was an unbridgeable gulf fixed between the material and the spiritual. They thought that no matter how much courage, skill wisdom, or intelligence a person brought to

living, fate or Fortuna would defeat them. Life was essentially hopeless and the spiritual was inaccessible.

In the midst of this a small despised sect was thinking arguing living and praying its way through this social quagmire. And its sources were the stories it told about Jesus. And in short its answer was this.

God is a communion of love – a communion of love forever given and enjoyed. God was not a love sucker, the purveyor of a pathological, unrequited love like the great Solitary in the sky but a love generator and giver. And that is where the idea of communion is important. God is not and has never been lonely. This is what the Gospels in the last two weeks from John 14 and John 16 are talking about.

They speak about the communion of love between the Son and the Father in the bond of the Spirit. This is not love unrequited, not love earned, but love ever given and forever enjoyed. This is the primal reality of all things. It is this reality that Trinity seeks to express. If Jesus is right then we are caught up into that love. We are not spectators. We are caught up into Trinitarian life, loving and being loved.

To put it in a more confronting way if we don't accept something like the Trinity we lose all hope that the ground, being itself, the primal uncreated reality of all things, where all things come from and where they are going, is the interpersonal communion of love; being-in-the fellowship of love.

Without such being-in-relation our social, religious and spiritual life will then be governed by other realities; chance, fortune, fate, the survival of the fittest or some other notion: Or in the development of religious and spiritual hierarchies, a denigration of the material world in beauty and sexuality.

What are the implications for discipleship?

First, it changes our ideas about what it means to be human. Our primal reality is God's ever circling, ever embracing love. But there are other primal myths abounding in our world. One such a myth is that of the power struggle, in which the weakest go to the wall and the strongest survive. This had enormous influence throughout the 20C and we tried to ameliorate the social effects through the welfare state, But it keeps coming back.

It does so because if we let go of the suprapersonal reality of ever giving love we must ask what lies at the heart of things. The

philosopher Nietzsche did just that for us and the only answer he could give was the will to power.

The Trinity is a very different picture about what the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is. It means, first and foremost, that the beginning and the end is shared communion and bliss, which is the being of the Trinity. This is the source and meaning of all human relationships. This is what God is building towards, the new creation. And we, in our humanity in Christ, are invited into this adventure of communion; an adventure of a living thriving unity in the midst of diversity.

How we work that out in practice is our daily spiritual adventure. How we live this out, how we invite others to join us in the primal dance of love is the mission of the church.

Second, and flowing from this, we know that God is not a Solitary, uninterested in our conflicts, in our struggles to live out the life of justice and right relations and truthfulness that characterises the nature of God. All the Biblical material on justice now makes sense. It is all about God.

God wants human beings to be fully alive. God works to that end. God incorporates us in salvation for that end. The battles the early

believers fought over the Trinity against the heretics was for humanity. God is not remote, sublime, despotic. God is not an Emperor who has no love or interest in the poor.

Third, it changes our idea about worship and prayer and spirituality. God's love simply goes on and in worship we are caught up in the praise of this love through the Son and in the power of the Spirit. This goes on forever.

Conclusion

Lesslie Newbigin tells a lovely story: An Anglican priest went to church in Crete one Sunday morning. Used to the 'one hour' rule in Anglicanism he didn't realize he would have to stand for three hours. After a couple of hours he called the deacon over and spoke to him. Ten minutes later the deacon returned and told him, 'There is a poached egg in the vestry.' The Anglican replied, 'But what about the liturgy?' To which the deacon responded, 'The liturgy is eternal, the egg will get cold.'²

Worship is not primarily our thing. It is our dropping in to the eternal love and praise of the Trinity. Praise and worship is not God sucking the life out of us but our dropping in to the eternal cycle of

² *ibid*, p.19

love. The same is true for our prayer and spirituality. They are not sessions of whining narcissism.