

A wondrous doctrine

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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2 Corinthians 13.11-13, Matthew 28.16-20

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most notoriously difficult subjects to understand and preach about. You will have to excuse me while I again tell my favourite joke about the Trinity.

Jesus said, "Who do men say that I am?" His disciples answered and said, "Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah, or other of the old prophets."

*And Jesus answered and said, "But who do **you** say that I am?"*

And they answered, "Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple."

And Jesus answering, said, "WHAT?"

The word Trinity is not mentioned anywhere in the bible even though the three persons of the Trinity are invoked in various prayers and phrases in the New Testament, like the great commission at the end of Matthew that we just heard or the farewell blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians that we also read. The formal doctrine of the Trinity was something that was developed around 200 to 300 years after those early writings and events. Maybe this is why preachers and theological students are nervous and tentative when grappling with the Trinity because trying to make sense of God as one and three at the same time, with little scriptural back up, makes any person stop and be very circumspect. Rarely does any theological student blithely write an essay on the Trinity particularly if they have to wade through the Cappadocean writers and the debates at Nicaea, where the church in council first clarified the doctrine. And that is someone who is looking back from the 21st century. It wasn't any easier if you were there or closer in time to the events.

There is a story told of St Augustine of Hippo, the great philosopher and theologian who wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity and to be able to explain it logically. One day as he was walking along the seashore and reflecting on this, he suddenly saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little cup, filled her cup, came and poured it into the hole she had made in the sand. Back and forth she went to the sea, filled her cup and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to her and said, "Little child, what are you doing?" and she replied, "I am trying to empty the sea into this hole." "How do you think," Augustine asked her, "that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole and with this tiny cup?" To which she replied, "And you, how do you suppose that with this your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?" With that the child disappeared.

And that of course is the problem in a nutshell. God is ultimately a mystery and our human words are only every pale and inaccurate approximations of his reality. This truth led the

anonymous writer of that famous medieval classic, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, to direct his or her readers to give up trying to understand God through knowledge and intellect. Instead, the only way to know God was through love and loving God.

In fact you can now close your eyes and ears and spend the next 10 minutes praising and loving God and you will get more out of this sermon than if you pay careful attention to what I am saying. Indeed, if you remember just one thing from this sermon, remember that message about knowing God by loving God. But for those that have decided to keep listening through politeness, curiosity or just maybe because I might say something that the Spirit can use in your life, I want to give you some background to the doctrine of the Trinity and why this notion of God is so profoundly important.

It all comes down to world views or a better name is perhaps cosmology. This is the way we understand our place in the universe and the relationship to things around us. Our worldview is not only an idea, it will inform all our thinking and actions. To give you a couple of examples: A dominant worldview in our culture is materialism, which says that there is nothing in the universe but matter and that we basically originated by chance through the physical processes of evolution.

A contrasting worldview would be the traditional Aboriginal culture that has quite a different perspective. They believe their beginnings were formed in 'the dreaming' when ancestral beings created the physical landscape which then embodied their spirit and power. People are part of the land and the land part of the people.

Back when the doctrine of the Trinity was developed, the dominant worldview was paganism with a smattering of platonic philosophy and Hebrew theology thrown in.

This cosmology had a view time as circular where behind the tales of heroes and the rise and fall of city empires lay a vast mythic prehistory. There was no sense of the future as a realm of unrealized possibilities. The natural world was part of a great hierarchy of powers with the most powerful God at the top and then a cascading world of elemental spirits, genii, daemons, gods and goddesses and occult powers all of which had to be invoked, supplicated and appeased. The most powerful God at the top did not come into contact with lesser mortals or matter and was fixed at the pinnacle, limited and bound by his own transcendence. It was an extremely hierarchical system and very determined. One of its most telling features was the presence of the Fates: these were three goddesses who spent their time weaving a rug where all the affairs of men and gods appear. There is nothing that can be done to alter this rug, even the gods were powerless to do so. In the end this worldview is a very complex and beautiful but a very bleak system. David Bentley Hart an orthodox theologian, an expert on the era, says it was imbued with deep sadness.

I've spent a bit of time trying to give you an overview of this worldview because with it we can then begin to see what an amazing feat the understanding of the Trinity was and how it presents a completely different worldview, one that we still have trouble grasping. For the idea of the Trinity grew out of the clash between the old pagan worldview and the new experience of the early Christian community. This community had had a powerful experience of the risen Lord and his Spirit. They had a profound sense of salvation and hope amidst oppression and fatalism. How then could they reconcile the two world views? Some of the early writers, and Arius is one of them, he of the very famous Arian controversy, said that it was impossible for the great God to become human and that Jesus was simply a lesser divine being, an intermediary if you like. We might think this idea was a very small matter but it completely destabilized the ancient world such that the emperor Constantine called a council, the Council of Nicaea, to get the issue sorted out.

Theologians, bishops and rulers gathered to grapple with the debate of the age and out of this meeting we have the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday.

Instead of proposing a hierarchical world made up of an inaccessible god and numerous other capricious spiritual powers and a human existence that was bound by fate, the doctrine of the Trinity taught that God was a relationship of love between three equal parts. It was creative love, beloved and lover, who became incarnate, became fully human, to show humanity and creation the way to fullness of life, a better future than the one they believed they were bound in. Salvation was nothing less than a real and living union between God and his creatures. As I have said in other sermons, God became us, that we might be one with God. As Hart puts it:

“Christ is one divine person who perfectly possesses everything proper to God and everything proper to humanity without robbing either of its integrity and who therefore makes it possible for every human being to become a partaker of the divine nature without therefore ceasing to be human”.

Now my theological language might be a bit thick and dense and unhelpful, a bit like that joke at the beginning. If you want to read a very simple book about the nature of the Trinity then read *The Shack*. You might have heard about it. It is the story of a man who loses his little daughter in the most frightful and tragic of circumstances, has a crisis of faith but then encounters the three persons of the Trinity in a shack in the woods. God the father is presented as an African American mother figure, Jesus is a very Arab looking carpenter and the Holy Spirit is a nymph like woman. A word of warning though, it is schmaltzy and I think badly written but it is an easy read and does have some very interesting and compelling thoughts on the Trinity, one of which is the very egalitarian and non—hierarchical nature of a world—view based on the Trinity.

For the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact a complete worldview. However it invites us into a very strange place for we are beings that construct hierarchical systems of power and authority. In our workplaces, families and churches, power and authority play out their roles for good or bad. We are beings that live disconnected from the world around us, out of touch with nature and the rhythm of the cycles of growth and decay. We are beings who are disconnected from each other as we rush from meeting to meeting, school to office and home again.

In the face of this disconnection the Trinity is all about relationship and connection and I think if we really inhabited and integrated the worldview the Trinity encapsulates it would transform our lives. For it is a view that says matter and the world is good and beautiful and true, that human beings have the seeds of goodness within them. It says that creation is the ‘very theatre of divine action’. It says that creation is not only good, it is worth God sacrificing himself to save. It says that love is powerful, creative and sustaining and that we can be part of a change in our future. We are not bound by chance or fate and nature is not defective and tragically separated from the wellspring of being and truth. It says that God is with us, around us and part of our existence, and that if we live in this realm then peace and justice will flourish. It tells us that we have a part to play in the great story of creation and that our human and earth well being depends not only on God but on each one of us.

One of my favourite metaphors for God the Trinity and us, as we are caught up in this picture is music. Each note, each nuance of a piece of music is important. From the most infinitesimal note on the oboe to the soaring crescendo of the tenor, each part matters and makes the whole complete. Each part must play its role for the whole piece to have integrity. The Trinity, like a piece of music, is not a hierarchical system but one that calls us into interdependence with each other. It puts God as close to us as we are to ourselves, and not on some lofty, inaccessible pinnacle.

It says that relationship and genuine connection with God and each other is vital for our wellbeing and wholeness.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we here at St Philip's want to be a place where people feel as if they belong and are connected. I believe we want to model the triune God's all-encompassing hospitality and love and help lead others into that life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, God with us. I am convinced, as I am convinced of nothing else, that this way leads to that 'peace which passes all understanding' for all creation. Notwithstanding the many and various ways the organized church has managed to get things wrong, this path, this worldview, is transformative.

May we live our lives in the knowledge and love of the triune God.