

A Hybrid Divinity

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, Year C, 16 June 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

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Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5: 1-5; John 6: 12-15

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, nowadays we need to face the fact that ours is no longer a black and white world—despite many people's nostalgia for supposedly simpler times, when things were apparently clearer.

We've got more choices now than either Labor or Liberal, Ford or Holden, Woolworths or Coles, Catholic or Protestant. We're even beginning to realise that insisting on two clear genders doesn't do justice to the richness of human experience, so that social

institutions like schools and marriage are being challenged to keep evolving. The world of human sexuality and human relationships has always been complicated, but these days we're more willing to

recognise and accept that complicatedness, rather than silencing, banishing or brutalising those who don't fit yesterday's strict either/or.

We've built our modern world on such neat, strict, either/or distinctions, and our rational minds have been trained to dislike anything hybrid or blurry. Yet it's this either/or mindset that the nineteenth-century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was challenging, in his poem "Pied Beauty," with the line "Glory be to God for dappled things" —and the fact that Hopkins was of homosexual inclination added a special poignancy to his words, since he knew what it was like to blur the official distinctions.

Friends, in the wide world of religions we've seen things in terms of a similar either/or distinction. There's monotheism, the religions of one God, and there's polytheism, the religions of many Gods.

Judaism and Islam are the religions of one God, while Hinduism and the so-called Greater Vehicle or Mahayana Buddhism, are religions of

many gods. But my point on this Trinity Sunday is that it's not right to call Christianity a radical monotheism, like Judaism and Islam— although I know that conservative Protestants and even some Sydney Anglicans can seem closer to Muslims than Catholics in many ways. But we Christians aren't polytheists either, worshipping many gods. Instead, we worship one God in three persons, to the confusion and amusement and sometimes the irritation of Jews and Muslims. We believe three ways in one God, as the English Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash put it. Or, to paraphrase the great Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth, we believe that our God is the communicator, that which is communicated, and the communication—that our God is more like an engaging human process of communication than a single loud voice with a megaphone.

Now, why do Christians believe this way? Because, through the long history of the Bible, and in the subsequent age of the creeds, Christians found that a remote, sovereign God was not an adequate

way to describe their religious experience. And we see this new awareness emerging in today's readings.

Our Proverbs reading today shares Israel's belief in its one God, the God of the Covenant. But this one God was also experienced in the beauty and order of the world, and as a God bound up with the lives of God's people. In Proverbs today we see Israel imagining a creature called Divine Wisdom, who was there from the beginning as God's delight and God's companion. It was with figures like this Divine Wisdom that the Bible began to talk about God in richer, more involved terms—a God near as well as far; a God in stereo, not just in mono. Without sacrificing monotheism, the Old Testament began to personify God in figures like 'Wisdom' and 'Glory' and 'Spirit', and here we find the beginnings of a journey that led Christian thinkers to the language of three persons in one God.

Our reading from Romans today, and our Gospel from John, are beautiful spiritual passages that belong to people who love and pray

and who know God through living the Christian life. And these readings point to a dynamic vision of God—the God of Israel who stands behind all reality erupts into that reality in person through Jesus Christ, who draws us in through a living process. Friends, our picture of God as Trinity emerges from this experience of what we might call everyday Christian mysticism.

Hence we hear John's Jesus, in our Gospel today, talking about the Holy Spirit bringing his own mind to birth in us—a Spirit sent to us at Jesus' behest from the Father. And for Paul, in our Romans reading today, God the Father, the God of Israel, the one true God, is working our side of the street, too, in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ draws us into his own life with his Heavenly Father, even into his sufferings, in order to transform and perfect us, and it's the Spirit who bonds Jesus together with his heavenly Father who is now poured out on the Church.

So, friends, we talk about the Threeness of God because, in the living spiritual reality of our life in Christ, we need a very special form of monotheism sufficient for the reality that we've discovered. And we talk about the Oneness of God because the ingathering of all truth, of all beauty, of all godliness through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, is too focussed and too unified for polytheism to do it justice.

Now, something that I always insist on when I preach on the Trinity is that this is a practical, not just a cerebral business. I began today by saying that the age of black and white is over: from our national politics to our gender politics. We live in a much more hybrid era, which has been called post-modern, and in these conditions many religious people throw up their hands. Many Christians are nostalgic for a simpler time—though in truth it's not for the cosmopolitan world of early Christianity that they pine, or for the diverse world of medieval Christianity that was anything but monochrome. Rather, it's the certainties of recent modern generations that they miss, the certainties of the 1950s. But, friends, if we worship one God in three

persons, if we take our monotheism with a dash of pluralism thrown in, if our sovereign God is busy deconstructing “His” sovereignty on the cross and in the rough and tumble of our spiritual life in the real world, then the Church may be way ahead of the game. Maybe our sense of God as Trinity helps us to be ready for these less certain times, because the certainties of our faith, while real, are liberating rather than constricting certainties. In a world where many crave the old divisions and exclusions, we Christians can relax into a more magnanimous and a more progressive posture. And we do this, not by denying our Christian convictions, but precisely because of our Christian convictions. I don’t speak here as a trendy, or as a theological liberal, but as a theologian firmly grounded in the orthodox, Catholic tradition. And what I believe is that the Gospel and the Church’s tradition call for a progressive attitude in the face of modern challenges, not a regressive one.

So let me wrap up. Our worship of one God in three persons holds together the one and the many, the near and the far, the all-mighty

and the all-vulnerable, the God above and the God in our midst, the glory of heaven and the brutal, crucifying history of earth. Friends, you and I are children of the Holy Trinity, whose circle dance of love opens a place for us to join in, here in the Eucharist today. Through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, the one who Jesus called his Father is making us a singular people indeed. And the world needs what we've got.

And would you join me as I pray, *+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.*