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## Trinity Sunday 2016

Jesus College, Oxford

*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31*

*John 16:12-15*

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On the floor of the nave of a glorious little Northumbrian Church in the village of Alnham lies a Seventeenth Century tombstone which has a quite legible, if rather rough, inscription on it. The wording goes halfway down the tomb, describing who it is that is commemorated and how she died. It then comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of a line. The concluding sentence, to which one's eye is drawn, reads 'Glory be to the Father and to the rest.'

I've often wondered about this. Was it intended as theological statement? Had the money run out or had the writer simply become bored? Whatever the case, it chimes with our times in which the doctrine of the Trinity is considered by many to be either obtuse and incomprehensible, or irrelevant. The doctrine is clearly compatible with scripture: once you know about it, it can be inferred from today's New Testament reading, as was suggested by the introduction. If you knew nothing about the Christian faith, however, you'd be hard pressed to come up with it if all you had was a copy of the New Testament, a pencil and piece of paper.

Why then did the Church Fathers spend so much time and energy considering and defining this doctrine? Quite simply because it's the closest the early Christians could come to describing their experience. Very soon after the resurrection they came to see that the only appropriate response to their risen Lord was worship and, being good Jews, they knew that to worship anything or anyone other than God would be idolatry. Jesus, they therefore came to realise, is God. And the same was true of the Holy Spirit that had been given to them. This was not some sort of celestial messenger but truly divine. Thus the notion of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit developed. At the same time, they held to the revelation to God's chosen people that God is one.

Three in one. That's surely absurd? No, it's paradox. As a former scientist it interests me that scientists, particularly physicists, are having to accustom themselves to the idea of paradox, so why not the rest of us? Is light wave or particle, for example? As Einstein wrote: 'It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.' Similarly, the seemingly irreconcilable propositions of the Trinity being three and one hold together.

It's also true to say that we can work the other way around, extrapolating from our own experience to see how it makes sense to talk of God in Trinitarian terms. Why? Because we are made in the image of God and so, as St Augustine reminds us, we should therefore expect to see in humanity intimations of the Trinity. Augustine, determined to defend the unity of the Trinity, looks for an analogy in the mental acts of remembering, understanding and willing. Augustine's great tome on the subject, *De Trinitate*, was stolen just before its publication by someone wanting to make a quick buck, incidentally. Those were the days!

Analogies like Augustine's 'psychological' concentrate on the 'oneness' of God. We might think similarly of the fact that as human beings we are body, mind and spirit and yet we are a unity. The Greek Fathers, on the other hand, write of a 'social' image of the Trinity which concentrates on the persons rather than the unity of the Trinity. Both give us important insights and the two need to be held in tension, as do the three in one, in proclaiming the great truth that God is one whilst, at the same time, that there is loving community at the heart of God.

That's the key, surely, the key revelation: that there is love within the heart of God. 'God is love', St John tells us, but self-love is an aberration. Within the Godhead the love of the Father is continually pouring into the Son, and the Spirit. Each of the persons of the Trinity is continually pouring love into the other two. Perfect love unifies. And it looks to create. The great truths that the Trinity gives us are that there is love within the Godhead and it is out of that love, and for that love, that we are created. It is to that love, revealed in Jesus, that you, Spencer, are committing yourself this evening. I pray that, as you are confirmed, the Holy Spirit will give you a deep sense of joy as you realise how deeply you are loved by God and how much God rejoices in you made, as you are, in his image.

As we reflect upon the Trinity we need to remember what St Thomas Aquinas pointed out, that all language about God is analogical and not literal. There are, in any case, many things that Jesus wants to tell us about God but, as Jesus himself puts it in this evening's New Testament reading, we cannot bear them now. We shall never 'understand' God any more than we shall ever 'see' an atom. None of us can properly understand or adequately describe the love we have for another person, let alone prove it. It's not surprising therefore that we cannot understand God, who is love, or prove the existence of God. You can't prove love.

As St Augustine puts it, if you have understood you have understood something other than God. All our images of God are inadequate to the infinite riches of the divine nature: human concepts which are ultimately idols to be broken in the face of a much greater reality. It's good to use our intellects in the divine quest, of course. Augustine goes on say that 'to reach out a little with the mind is great blessedness, yet to understand is wholly impossible.'

Having reached out a little with the mind we need to make what is, ultimately, the only appropriate response to God: fall down in love and worship. And be fed, letting the love of God pour into us and feed us, body, mind and soul. For man does not live on bread alone. Elsewhere, St Augustine says that we know in so far as we love, not surprising in view of the fact that God is love. As St John puts it, those who live in love live in God and God lives in them. Or, if you prefer, in the words of this evening's wonderful anthem, *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.*

It is to the extent that we allow God's love to transform us and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, love God and our fellow humans beings, that we bear the image of God. May our lives then join the heavenly worship of the angels to proclaim: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come.' **Amen.**

+John Wigorn:

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