

## Trinity Sunday, 2015

### Prayer

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Don't you just love the strength, energy and might of the first four lines of John Donne's 14th Holy Sonnet? He seeks not a gentle God who knocks, breathes and shines but a three-person'd one to break, blow and burn his obdurate spirit - a good old-fashioned wrathful God of the Old Testament.

We are invited this Sunday to contemplate God, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity. This feast was first celebrated during the time of Thomas a Becket, but has no firm foundation in the Bible. Perhaps it represents theological dogma of Greek philosophers and, as such, is unpopular with many Christians who prefer to stick to the simple love of God, as expressed through his son, Jesus Christ and in keeping with the very first disciples' faith - a view of the Unitarians. Perhaps this is why it is seen as drawing the short straw to be preaching on Trinity Sunday. I however agree with John Hughes who, in his first sermon at Jesus College Cambridge on Trinity Sunday 2010, expressed a joy and delight in preaching on this day. Moreover he went on to say that the Trinity was not just one Christian belief amongst others, but that in this concept the whole of the Christian Faith is at stake and that we cast out the bath water at our peril. So how can we get our heads around this concept of one in three and three in one? Well, here goes!

The Holy Trinity is not simple to understand as revealed in the precise language of this morning's collect when we are asked "to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity." Confusion and tension revolves around the idea of a separate yet unified triune God in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this is not a problem to be solved, but rather a mystery, an awesome wonder, to be prayed over. And what could be more amazing, magnificent and awesome than the theophany of Isaiah, his vision of God, which we heard in our first reading, when the hem of God's robe filled the Temple? And that's just a starter, do read it again.

However complicated the concept, it is in our nature as humans to make sense of the Holy Trinity through figurative language, through diagrams, icons

and paintings, and, as you will realise in a moment, through physical visual aids. Popular diagrams for the Trinity are three leafed clovers or shamrocks, Venn diagrams or I rather like the three Christian fish diagram. I love St Andrei Rublev's icon of the three Angels representing the Trinity. Most powerful for me is the idea of the cross as a symbol of the Trinity. The vertical beam symbolises God, the Father, the Creator, the transcendent aspect of God coming down to earth. The horizontal beam of the cross symbolises the Holy Spirit who extends across our whole lives. The heart of the cross symbolises Jesus, whose heart loved us so much that he gave his life for you, for me, for all on that cross. So for those of us who cross ourselves we are reminded of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit or perhaps you prefer the more inclusive language of Julian of Norwich's Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer or the relationship language of St Augustine's Lover, Beloved, Love or the Lutheran expression of "May God be in my mind, in my heart, in my whole being." That's the physical visual aids over.

However we try and express God or the Trinity, we must realise the impossibility of the task, as God transcends human understanding and is "other" or not of this world. God cannot be confined to our imaginations. As St Augustine says, "When we speak of God, we do so in a learnedly ignorant way, and that requires a great humility."

I'm reminded of the recent film "The Theory of Everything" on the amazing life of the great physicist, Stephen Hawking. We hear how Hawking is searching for an equation which will take us back beyond the beginning of time into the black hole at the origin of the universe. He says to his wife Jane, "This will give us access to the mind of God." Jane, a churchgoer and Christian, delights in this response from Stephen, whom she has always seen as an atheist and so responds by saying, " Ah! You are not an atheist after all." God cannot be identified by a black hole or anything material and yet God uses materials, and especially the human person of Jesus Christ, to reveal himself to us. But we need to take great care how we speak of God. The God we worship is not an old man in the sky, or a black hole but an unseen, unimaginable being whom we dare to call Father, who reveals himself fully in Jesus, his Son, and touches us by transcending the space between Earth and heaven through His Holy Spirit. The three persons are bound together in unity through a relationship of love, which is the Holy Trinity. For God is love and "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have

everlasting life." And this very Son breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples, just as today he breathes His Holy Spirit on us. As Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

So I'll finish where I started with the figurative language of poetry, which at its best, I believe, comes closest to expressing the paradox of the Trinity, however distant that might be. This is a traditional Celtic Christian prayer:

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,  
Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair,  
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,  
Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share,  
Three Persons in God: to one God alone we make our prayer.

Bill Pattinson

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