

Trinity Sunday – Year B

John 3: 1 - 17

How successful do you think an oyster would be at describing ballerinas? Barbara Brown Taylor likens this conundrum to trying to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity.¹ Because the Holy Trinity is in fact mystery. Not mystery like a whodunit to solve, but mystery in the sense that there are and always will be, aspects of God that remain unknowable to us. The Trinity is such. As one writer states, the Trinity is “unquestionably one of the most perplexing aspects of Christian theology”².

How do we describe the Holy Trinity? We have the simple saying, “Three in one, one in three, this is the holy Trinity” to describe the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We have the less simple creed which state they are distinctly three, yet one; “co-eternal and co-equal”.³ We have the early church teaching that they are “one in essence, distinguished in three persons”⁴. Theologians state, “Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work transformingly in the world by the Holy Spirit”. And, “workings of divine love attested in scripture and experienced by the Christian community”.⁵

I’m not going to try to explain the Trinity in great detail. For me, it’s like Einstein’s theory of general relativity: I don’t really understand it, but I see evidence of it all around in the concept of gravity and how it stops things falling into chaos. I’m the oyster who has decided to simply bask in the ballet instead of trying to analyse it! However, I think it is safe to say two things about the Trinity: it is both mystery and love.

We see evidence of this in today’s gospel reading. Jesus tells Nicodemus about the love of the Father, maker of heaven and earth. A love that compelled him to send the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it through what the Son would accomplish on the cross, the defeat of death. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, quoting Robert Farrar Capon, “Three Hands Clapping,” in *Home By Another Way*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 152-153.

² Alister E. McGrath, “Christian Theology: An Introduction”, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p.319.

³ The Athanasian Creed.

⁴ Councils of Nicea and Constantinople

⁵ Daniel L. Migliore, “Faith Seeding Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology”, Eerdmans, 1991, p.59.

that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". Eternal life by being born from above, touched by God's love, mercy and grace made manifest in Jesus, his only begotten Son. By being born from above, enveloped in the breath of the Spirit, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son, the wind that "blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (v8). Mystery and love.

So what does the Trinity reveal to us about the essence of the three personhood of God and what can we learn from it? Firstly, it shows us that God lives and loves as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in relationship. Their identity is in relationship, the Triune God's existence is communal, not individual.

The persons of the Trinity are not isolated and independent beings. They don't define themselves separately and individually as do so many in our Western world, they are not lone rangers. Daniel Migliore expresses it well when he says the, "three persons of the Trinity have their distinctive identity only in their deepest relationship with each other. They 'indwell' each other, they make room for each other, are incomparably hospitable to each other".⁶ The Trinity shows us how to live with each other by showing how they live with each other – in self-giving love, by attentiveness to the other, by making hospitable room for the other.

One theologian likens the Trinity to the turning of a paddle wheel. The love of the Father spills over into the Son which in turn spills over into the Holy Spirit, and back to the Father. What is generated out of that continuous movement or rhythm is a relationship of visible energy and creativity and love.⁷

One of the most famous images to capture the mystery and love of the Trinity is Andrei Rublev's 15th century icon. Traditionally a depiction of the angelic visitation to Sarah and Abraham, it has come to be seen as a depiction of the Trinity.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 69-70.

⁷ http://prodigal.typepad.com/prodigal_kiwi/files/paul_fromont_rublevs_icon_contemplating_the_trinity_inwardly_and_outwardly.pdf

At first glance we see three very similar looking, similar dressed figures seated around a table which holds a cup. To the left is the Father clothed in garments which seem to shimmer, reflecting the Heavenly Glory. To the right is the Holy Spirit, clothed in green and blue hues: the colours of the Earth. And in the centre is the Son, his clothes are deep red cloaked in blue, representing his divine and human natures.

The Son and the Holy Spirit both look loving and reverently to the Father. The Father's hand is raised in blessing towards the Son, whom he sent to the world in love. The Son in turn blesses the cup, symbolic of his sacrificial love for the world: the body that was broken, the blood that was shed. Note how our eyes are led into the scene by the empty space at the front of the table, the space the Holy Spirit points to.

There is room at this table for us. We are invited to be drawn into the hospitality, inclusion and community that is the loving Triune God. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit make space for us and invites us in. We are all welcome at God's table to share in the feast. To share in the love and attentiveness the Holy Trinity gives to each other and to us.

Over this coming week, I invite you to keep this icon in a prominent place and regularly return to this scene. Remembering that you are welcomed, desired, and loved by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Remembering that following their example, we are to show that same creative love and make room for the other.

The Trinity is a great mystery. I invite you to be oysters that bask in the ballet and remember that you are loved.