

# *gratuitous & inexhaustible*

a sermon preached on the

## *Feast of the Holy Trinity*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Exodus 34:1-8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

The Christian doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity has a habit and a history of dividing people. Responses to the doctrine seem to me to fall into two basic categories.

Perhaps the first and most obvious would be as absolutely certain, non-negotiable 'article of belief' – declared in the creeds and such documents as the 39 Articles.<sup>1</sup> As we have heard today: go and baptise people "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".<sup>2</sup> Attaching oneself to this doctrine is a matter of being 'saved' – where saved is pretty much like being on the winning team. Those who refuse to accept this doctrine are 'unorthodox'.

Christians who worry about Islam need to realise that the very existence of Islam owes something to this un-Christlike legalistic development within Christianity – many of those in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century being Christians who were driven out by a Christendom increasingly fixated by order and control.

Then there's the opposite reaction to all this. Somewhat shocked by Christendom's use of power – and/or unable to accept the church's philosophical assumptions required to make Trinity work as an idea – there are increasing numbers of Christians for whom Trinity is archaic, somewhat quaint, or just plain embarrassing. Talk of divine 'substance' and 'persons' requires a Greek philosophical and medieval scholastic mindset most of us do not have. We can't figure this thing out as a rational concept – as we now expect everything to be figured out. Sunday school analogies were fine for the ten-year-old brain (maybe!) I suspect increasing numbers of us feel unable to respond to the Moslem allegation that we have three gods not one.

So, if we are still in the church, we cross our fingers when we say the creed – or we don't say it at all – out of a desire to be honest with ourselves. I have no doubt this is a genuine struggle. Some Christian commentators – pastorally sympathetic to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seeker – have openly promoted the idea that Trinity doctrine needs to be abandoned.

Returning to the first stance, let's look a little more closely. I find this position completely unconvincing. No, I need to put it more frankly: I think the legalistic-institutional stance is an offence to Christ and destructive of the church's mission. It is *not* good news to force oneself to 'believe in' something that does not make sense. It is morally wrong – and surely the opposite of *evangelion* – to carve up the world's peoples into eternally-locked compartments according to a philosophical idea. Moreover, with great respect, I question the ethics of legalistic-institutional belief in the Trinity. For I can so easily tell you that I 'believe in' the doctrine of the Trinity – I can say all the right words, and reassure myself that I qualify as 'orthodox' Christian – yet blithely use this conviction in a manner which is fundamentally violent and un-Christlike. I can apparently 'believe in' this doctrine, yet uncritically accept being a market economics winner, culpably turning my back on the market's millions of losers. Coincidentally, just as our Roman Catholic Prime Minister is busy showing off his important friends his enthusiastic belief in market economics, his Pope has described it as "madness".<sup>3</sup>

What about the second stance? Actually, I find this unconvincing also – though I readily accept that many who find themselves adopting this stance do so for thoroughly laudable reasons. It is more honest than the first stance – since it does at least take account of the actual historical facts of Christendom (and neo-Christendom's) violence, intellectual and physical. Nevertheless, in the end it leads to soul-death by dry rationalism.

So where to, then? What follows is a personal attempt at locating all this in a stance that is neither historical-institutional, nor dustily rational. For me, at least, the 'solution' – though I use that word advisedly – is remembering that the doctrine is precisely that, a doctrine.

<sup>1</sup> Article 1, 'Of the faith in the Holy Trinity', The Articles of Religion

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>3</sup> "World economic system is 'madness', puts money ahead of people, Pope Francis says", ABC online, Saturday 14 June 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-13/pope-francis-says-global-economy-discards-young/5523226>

Doctrines are, first and foremost, symbols. Symbols are neither news reportage, nor philosophical reason. The symbol involves both history and reason, of course. But doctrines are not ideas dropping from the sky – rather, the outcome of a wrestling with actual experience. This is how I understand what is going on in today’s story of Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>4</sup> A symbol is not a static artefact in a religious trophy cabinet – certainly not a mathematical equation – which may be taken out from time to time and dusted off. A symbol is not a yardstick by which I measure who is in and who is out.

So what is a symbol, then? And what, specifically, is this symbol of the Trinity?

I make sense of symbol in this way. A symbol is a living reality whose content is inexhaustible – an unexpected gift which mediates a previously unimaginable and more comprehensive truth. Symbols are by their very nature healing, reconciling, liberating, encompassing, life-enhancing. True symbols reconcile opposites.

I say ‘true’ because, like anything else, symbols can be perverted and used for destructive ends. An obvious illustration would be the symbols adopted by Nazi Germany. A more uncomfortable illustration would be the Christian symbol of the cross. The cross as symbol mediates previously-unimaginable reconciliation: of transcendence and immanence; divinity and humanity; spirit and flesh; to name the most obvious. “In Christ [through the cross] God was reconciling the world to Godself”.<sup>5</sup> So when the cross is used by the church to divide and conquer peoples this is clearly a travesty, a gross perversion – a calamitous crime against the *evangelion* of Christ. I cannot see how anything that uses the cross to divide peoples can possibly be called ‘evangelical’. This abuse of the cross owes much to the first recorded ‘Christian’ military victory and the emperor Constantine’s claim: *In hoc signo vinces*, ‘in this sign you will conquer’.

But, as I have said, a symbol by its very nature constitutes healing, reconciling, liberating, encompassing – which mediates the as-yet unknown greater and more comprehensive truth, whose content is infinitely inexhaustible.

The symbol of the Trinity is precisely such a dynamic, living reality – not a static historical-intellectual artefact to be preserved or defended, nor a sign with which to ‘conquer’. The symbol of the Trinity gestures towards the inexhaustible reality of the Divine creating. As symbol, Trinity mediates the completely unexpected and surprising reconciliation of transcendence and immanence, of spirit and matter, of divinity and humanity. Trinity mediates the more comprehensive encompassment of all energies and elements. Looking for a word to describe what this process is like, early church ‘fathers’ employed the Greek word *perichoresis* – a being-in-one-another, a permeation without confusion, a dynamic based on mutuality, an inexhaustible inter-dependence, summed up in one word, a dance!

As symbol, the Trinity not only reveals the dance of mutual inter-dependence and love which is the very nature of the Divine – it also illuminates what is to be the goal and purpose and manner of every human life.

Finally, and crucially, symbol is never under my control. I do not construct or create the symbol. Rather, symbol is that which is unexpectedly and freely given. When all seems lost – when I am unable to see any possible way forward in the midst of life’s unresolvable tensions, when neither the ‘right’ nor the ‘left’ can show the way forward – the symbol arises organically as a dynamic and life-enhancing third position. The Trinity itself is indeed the very embodiment of the ongoing gratuity and dynamism of Life.

The spiritual intuition revealed in Rublev’s icon of the Trinity is inspired and precise: eucharistic action is the symbol of the grace and dynamism of the Divine life, that inexhaustible and gratuitous life, which is to be enfleshed by those who consume it, who participate in it.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:1-8

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19