

*truth & life*  
a sermon preached on the feast of the  
*most holy & blessed trinity*

22 May 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

There is a famous encounter between the legendary Albert Einstein and a completely unknown (except to professionals) Belgian mathematician-priest named Georges LeMaître. By the time they met Einstein was now the great authority in cosmology. Einstein was famously committed to the historic philosophical position, that which envisaged a static-state model of the universe. His theories and equations challenged the static-state model, and he was very uncomfortable about that. He was so committed to what he thought must be so, that he even felt it necessary to invent something called the 'cosmological constant' in order to make his own equations work. Later he is said to have regarded this as the greatest blunder of his life.

However, while Einstein was still thus committed, the young Belgian priest LeMaître derived a *nonstatic* solution to Einstein's equations. It was the largely-unknown LeMaître who coined the now-familiar term 'Big Bang', which speaks of an expanding universe. But when he first had the opportunity to meet Einstein, keen to receive some support from the great man, Einstein summarily dismissed him, allegedly declaring: "Your math is correct, but your physics is abominable".<sup>1</sup> One gets the impression that Einstein had forgotten his own beginnings – his early work so threatened the established scientific paradigm of the time that it was initially ridiculed.

This story reminds us that even the greatest of genius scientists cannot escape the inertia of their humanity. Even those ostensibly dedicated to an unfettered quest for knowledge are capable of becoming overly-attached to their models and equations – so much so that once their ideas become established, and they become 'famous', they can become as aggressively resistant to new development as those who they had to fight to get a hearing when they themselves began. This dynamic can be observed in every discipline, every facet of life.

On this feast day of the Blessed and Holy Trinity the gospel reminds us that this is also true of the religious quest. It can certainly be observed in the life of a parish community, which can so easily get stuck, unable to liberate its best energies. "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth."<sup>2</sup> Whatever truth we may have grasped in relation to God, it is but a fragment of the whole truth. Our dogmas are always partial, incomplete. But especially when anxious, feeling threatened and feeling defensive, we tend to use our incomplete dogmas as weapons against the perceived threat.

All religious tradition, like all human developments, is built both on novelty as well as on hard-won settlements and agreements. Science calls such collective agreements 'paradigms'. Religion calls them 'doctrines'. And we cannot do without them. Jettisoning doctrines is as foolish and dangerous as imagining that we can do without scientific paradigms. And even a glance around is sufficient to reveal the great mass of people who, having concluded the doctrines unnecessary, are without root or ground – tossed hither and thither, easy prey to every passing marketing campaign, fad, and consumable package.

The triumph of 'Christian orthodoxy', thrashed out at councils of the church during the fourth and fifth centuries especially, is a tremendous edifice of systematising and stability, without doubt. Politically, economically and culturally it has been the basis for an astonishing concentrating of

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Prueett, *Reason and Wonder: A Copernican Revolution in Science and Spirit*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012, p141.

<sup>2</sup> John 16:12-13a

energies and astounding accomplishments spanning many centuries. It has been like the reactor core for Western civilisation. Yet honesty compels us to admit that ‘Christian orthodoxy’ has also spawned or fuelled some of the most horrendous events in Western history.

Jesus’ declaration in this sixteenth chapter of John is one more stark warning (there have been many in the gospels) about ‘doctrinal obsolescence’. For every claim to have found the final and absolute truth – the perfect doctrinal equation, the most precise or beautiful model – is interrogated and found wanting by Jesus’ declaration: “I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now”. We simply cannot bear all the truth and survive the encounter – just as the Hebrews had long ago realised that a human cannot see the face of God and live, indeed cannot even name!<sup>3</sup>

This is sobering, yes. Sobering because all our certainty about doctrinal formulations or models for God is but a mirage. This is what Meister Eckhart was getting at when he declared: “Let us pray to God that we may be free of ‘God’”.<sup>4</sup> Eckhart is alerting us to a crucial spiritual truth: what is imagined to be ‘God’ is not in fact God, only ever an approximation, partial, incomplete – sometimes illusory and dangerous in fact. That, certainly, is a sobering realisation for we humans, so desperate for something to hang on to,<sup>5</sup> something we can rely upon in a shifting and threatening world. Sobering because – whether we like it or not – all our certainty will be swept away by the Divine Spirit, who blows where she will.<sup>6</sup>

Sobering, yes: yet so liberating! If we can loosen our grip, our clenched fists and hearts – and laugh a bit at our insecurity and anxiety – we will experience the joy of resurrection. The religious formulas and models which have given us valuable shelter from the stormy world thus far, good though they may be, are not capable of saving us. “When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all truth”.<sup>7</sup> This is Sophia-Wisdom who was created as the first act of God, at the beginning,<sup>8</sup> who has never ceased to motivate ongoing creation.

The true liberation our hearts’ desire is the work of the Spirit who leads us into all truth – the Spirit who reveals yet more than can ever be contained in even the very best of our religious formulas and models. “The Spirit will... take what [belongs to the Son, which has been given by the Father] and declare it to you”.<sup>9</sup>

This sacred meal is always an invitation to be open to that deeper and fuller truth which the coming Spirit is making known. In that great 14<sup>th</sup> century icon of the Trinity, by Andrei Rublev, beneath the three seated Divine persons, beneath the Eucharistic chalice in their midst at the very centre, there is a curious little window to apparently-nowhere. It is a symbolic device, of course, which draws our attention beyond the two dimensional surface of the icon, to that which the Spirit is making known. Pay attention to that little nondescript window!

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>4</sup> Meister Eckhart, Sermon 52, in Edmund Colledge & Bernard McGinn (trans.), **Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense**, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981, p200.

<sup>5</sup> John 20:17

<sup>6</sup> John 3:8

<sup>7</sup> John 16:13

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 8:22-31

<sup>9</sup> John 16:14-15