

the divine dance

a sermon preached on

trinity sunday

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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

In an art class at a Catholic primary school, a little girl sat hunched over her paper, drawing with absolute focus, the tip of her tongue slightly protruding as she concentrated. The teacher, seeing her engrossed in her work approached her and asked what she was drawing. "God", said the little girl, without looking up from her work. Laughing, the teacher said, "But no-one knows what God looks like!" Exasperated by the further interruption, the little girl stopped, looked up at the teacher and replied, "They will when I have finished!"

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when we wrestle with what the Triune God looks like. There are many images that have been used to try to help us express how God can be three and one; the shamrock leaf with its three lobes, water that can be solid, liquid and gas, the egg – made up of yolk, white & shell, an equilateral triangle.

At a more sophisticated level there is the stunning fifteenth century icon written by Andrei Rublev, "The Hospitality of Abraham". This icon is based on the Genesis 18 story of Abraham offering hospitality to three angels. These three, in iconography, are seen by Christians as an expression of the Trinity as they speak and act as one. The movement in the icon circles from one figure to the next, drawing us in and inviting us to fill the empty place at the table. Rowan Williams writes about this beautifully.

The mystery of the Father is seen or encountered through the Son, and then seen or encountered as breathing out the Spirit; and that Spirit leads nowhere but back to the Son. ... So the life of the Father is only to be understood as wholly directed to that breathing of the Spirit which makes the Son alive and real.¹

So, we have wonderful art and imagery that attempts to express the mystery of God, understood as Trinity. We also have many words that seek to do the same. The early theologians wrestled with how Christians could understand and express their new discoveries about God. In the 5th century, the words of the Athanasian Creed for the first time formulated a Trinitarian doctrine:

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.

To this, many Christians have added, and the whole lot, incomprehensible!

¹ Rowan Williams. *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (John Garratt Publishing, 2003), 55.

And it's true isn't it? However rich and beautiful the images we contemplate, and however nuanced and sophisticated the words we craft, we could still ask why it makes any difference to us to understand God as Trinity.

The German theologian, Karl Rahner, has said that:

Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. We must be willing to admit that should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.²

I find this a confronting thought! Our scriptures speak of the work of God as creator, as incarnate in humanity, as life-giving, energising Spirit. Jesus speaks about God his Father who has sent him and who will send the Holy Spirit. What difference would it make to my faith if I was to become more consciously Trinitarian in my prayer and in my practice?

In the early days of Christianity, when we were still a part of Judaism, to conceive of God as three in one was blasphemous. Two thousand years later, it no longer shocks us but perhaps that is because, as Rahner says, we largely ignore the Trinitarian claims of our faith and give little thought to why believing in a Triune God makes a difference. This is the focus of Richard Rohr's book, "The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation".³ and it is this work primarily that has stimulated and stretched my thinking in writing this sermon.

Along with the Jews and the Moslems, we worship God who is One. But from as early as the fourth century the Cappadocian mystics were exploring the deepest nature of the One as being expressed through the Three. Richard Rohr suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to explain the dynamic flow of love that is God. He says:

The principle of one is lonely; the principle of two is oppositional and moves you toward preference; the principle of three is inherently moving, dynamic, and generative.⁴

A Trinitarian faith is inherently relational; based on the flow of love that is God. In the first creation story in Genesis, God creates us in God's own image. We are made as mirrors of God's love and of God's identity. We are created to be in relationship with each other and with God who is by nature creative, dynamic, inviting; a relationship of love.

And it is not just humanity that reflects the nature of God. The more scientists discover about the universe, the more its relational nature is revealed. This is true at both the micro- and the macro- level. Healthy ecosystems are balanced and sustained by the complex interactions between living things and their environment. Planets are held in orbit by immense powers that simultaneously draw them together and keep them apart while they spin and move. Subatomic particles are held together so strongly that to force them apart unleashes the power of a nuclear bomb.

The richness, the life, the power in all these examples does not lie in the individual things but in the relationship between them; in what flows through the spaces. Break the relationship, stop the flow, and life is damaged or destroyed.

We worship a God who is relationship; three persons, one God, and that should make a difference to who we are. As we become more Trinitarian in our faith our lives will more accurately reflect the One who made us. We will begin to see the world as one of wholeness through diversity and strength through interdependence. We will no longer be able to easily separate the world into the 'goodies' and the

² Karl Rahner. *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 10-11.

³ Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell. *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (SPCK, 2016)

⁴ Rohr with Morrell. *The Divine Dance*, 42.

'baddies'. Instead we will see that God who is relationship is always creating, allowing possibilities, bringing about transformation and making things whole.

Rowan Williams puts it like this:

The doctrines of Christ and of the Trinity can seem remarkably remote and theoretical to most people these days; what we seem to forget is that they were designed in order not only to tell us the truth about God but to make us live that truth. They are *invitations*, ways of passing on Jesus' invitation to be changed, to repent and trust him, to walk with him.

This means that we cannot work together nicely on the surface while continuing to seethe with anger and hatred towards each other underneath. The divine flow of love is inherent in the building blocks of life. It demands of us that we be authentic and real; pretence will not do.

To truly worship the flow of relational love that is God, means a radical change in our vision and in our way of being so that we see relationship as foundational to who we are called to be. We are invited to change, repentance, trust. This is a difficult frustrating way to live. It was this kind of living that led Jesus to the cross, because a God who is by nature relationship could only remain in loving connection, even when that meant death. That is the way of life to which our relational God calls us and which our world desperately needs.

As well as being difficult and frustrating, this is a vulnerable way to live. As Richard Rohr reminds us, "Human strength admires autonomy; God's mystery rests in mutuality".⁵ Allowing ourselves to be open to the flow of God's love, being vulnerable and risking staying in relationship, means that we cannot just rely on a set of rigid beliefs or unshakeable rules. It means that we must engage with the world in love, working at staying in relationship, asking questions, listening to the answers and struggling with the implications. That is a much harder thing to do. It's what Jesus did.

Let me read you this wonderful passage from *The Divine Dance*:

Jesus never has any such checklist test before he heals anybody. He just says, as it were, "Are you going to allow yourself to be touched? If so, let's go!

The touchable ones are the healed ones; it's pretty much that simple. There's no doctrinal test. There's no moral test. There is no checking out if they are Jewish, gay, baptized, or in their first marriage. There's only the one question:

*"Do you want to be healed?"*⁶

At the end of Richard Rohr's book, he suggests several practices to help us become more conscious of God's nature and therefore more intentionally Trinitarian in our prayer life.⁷ Here are three of them.

Lectio Divina, the practice of reading a short passage of scripture and meditating on it. The aim is to help us encounter God as someone to whom we relate in our hearts rather than as a concept we think about; to immerse ourselves in the spaces between and to feel the flow of God's love.

Another is praying the name Yahweh using our breath; allowing ourselves to form the sound 'Yah' as we breathe in and 'weh' as we breathe out. The aim of this is to focus on the mystery and unknowability of God as we stay present before God, repeating the divine name and allowing ourselves to be open to the revealing of the divine nature.

⁵ Rohr with Morrell. *The Divine Dance*, 59.

⁶ Rohr with Morrell. *The Divine Dance*, 58.

⁷ Rohr with Morrell. *The Divine Dance*, 199-217.

Finally, the practice of making the sign of the cross. As we consciously, lovingly and prayerfully unite our minds, guts and heart through the sign of the cross we honour our relationship with God, embodied in ourselves.

We can never fully understand or explain the nature of God, but these, and other contemplative practices can help us to experience the relationship of love that is God. God invites us to join the divine dance, to allow ourselves to become swept up in the energy of love that transforms us, to enter the dynamism of the flow of love through the 'spaces between', rejoicing in the whole lot, incomprehensible!