

## The Trinity – A Way of Thinking About God

*A Trinity Sunday sermon by Dr Harold Henderson, Senior Minister, June 2007.*

I well remember an occasion when I attended a worship service on Trinity Sunday at St George's Anglican Cathedral in East Jerusalem. The preacher was a fellow Australian priest who began his sermon by telling a story about an Anglican Vicar in a small village in the English countryside.

It was the Vicar's custom to arrange for the celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving on Trinity Sunday each year, even though Trinity Sunday and harvest time never coincided. (Harvest Thanksgiving seems unknown in the calendar of the American church, but it is widely celebrated in England and Australia by decorating the sanctuary with colorful displays of produce as an act of thanksgiving to God for the harvest).

Because Trinity Sunday was out of synch with harvest time, the parishioners began to complain that it was always difficult to find suitable produce to decorate the sanctuary and they began to notice that no other churches in their area observed Harvest Thanksgiving on Trinity Sunday. So they asked the Vicar why they couldn't move Harvest Thanksgiving to harvest time and celebrate the Trinity on Trinity Sunday. "Because I wouldn't know what to say about the Trinity," was the Vicar's honest reply. They continued to celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving on Trinity Sunday!

The Vicar's solution to his dilemma was probably unique but his dilemma was not. Trinity Sunday is a day when many preachers find something else on which to preach. I've even known one preacher to call in sick on Trinity Sunday! (Of course, preachers in those traditions that give no evidence of knowing what or when Trinity Sunday is, sadly don't have this problem.)

If ever the doctrinal police come after you, one of their basic concerns will be to make sure that you are "sound" on the doctrine of the Trinity, whether you observe Trinity Sunday or not. The doctrine of the Trinity is seen as fundamental to any notion of Christian orthodoxy, not necessarily because it is of esoteric interest to scholars but because it has deep relevance to the kind of God we worship.

And yet the doctrine of the Trinity is not a biblical doctrine in the sense that it is nowhere spelled out in Scripture. You wouldn't expect to find it in the Hebrew Scriptures (to which we refer as the Old Testament) but you can pore

over the New Testament from Matthew to The Revelation and you won't find it there either.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are letters most of which follow the familiar format of a first Century letter. In most cases they begin like a modern email – with a "From" and "To" format, followed by a salutation or a blessing. In no case is there a salutation or a blessing that follows a Trinitarian format. They are all either Unitarian (e.g. "grace and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ") or what might be called Binitarian (e.g. "grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"). In no case is there any reference to the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, a benediction comes at or near the end of most of the New Testament letters and sometimes there is more than one benediction in a particular letter, but in only one case (11 Corinthians 13:14) is there a Trinitarian formula – "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Again, all the others are either Unitarian or Binitarian and this one case does not amount to a doctrinal exposition.

The obvious question, then, is: "If this doctrine that is so foundational to Christian orthodoxy did not come from the Bible, **where did the doctrine come from?**" The answer is just as obvious. It came from the Church, from the evolving Tradition of the early centuries of the Christian era. So did the Apostles Creed. And so did the New Testament itself.

It is often not recognized that most of the books of the New Testament did not begin to be written until 20 or 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and that those scattered writings did not finally come together to form the New Testament as we have it until 2 or 3 centuries after that. That process was a combination of popular usage and scholarly endeavor, and the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was an early part of that larger process.

It is interesting and instructive to reflect on how the doctrine came to be developed. The earliest Christians were devout Monotheists (believers in One God as against their Polytheist neighbors who believed in many gods). They were brought up to recite and believe the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength..." (Deuteronomy 6:4 *ff*). Notice in

passing that there is no mention of the “mind” here; Jesus added it in centuries later. Nor do the instructions go on to say: “and (love) your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus added that, too, centuries later from a different book altogether (Leviticus 19:18).

It was the Church that gave us the original New Testament writings; it was the Church that included the books we now have in the New Testament and excluded others; and it was the Church that gave us the doctrine of the Trinity by the same process. Of course, we believe and affirm that all of that was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but the community of faith was the human vehicle by which that happened.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that it was a gradual process. The famous prologue of the Gospel of John (written toward the end of the First Century CE), for example, is a good illustration of the protracted nature of that process. The prologue tells us that the Word (the divine *logos*) “was in the beginning, was with God, was God, and became flesh and lived among us” and that “we beheld his glory, the glory as of a (or the) father’s only son, full of grace and truth (1:1-14 NRSV). Magnificent as this prologue is in declaring the Incarnation of God in the birth of Jesus, it is yet (ie. toward the end of the First Century) not a Trinitarian formulation. It is binitarian. There is no reference to the Holy Spirit yet.

As the Church initially experienced and, as time went by reflected on, the ministry of Jesus (perhaps most adequately described as the Christ event) and on the subsequent and ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit in the expansion of the Church beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries, it seemed that those ministries were expressions of the life of the one true God of the *Shema*. It is as if the encounters of the early disciples, and the Church of the early centuries, with Jesus and with the Holy Spirit were experienced as authentic and powerful encounters with God.

Did this mean that there were three Gods? It would have been an enormous stretch for the early Christians, steeped in their monotheistic tradition, to reach that conclusion. Nor would the idea of one God putting on three different masks to assume three different characters in a kind of one-actor morality play have matched their experience adequately.

A closer analogy might have been that, when they drew water from the village well, when they saw the lake iced over in extremely cold weather, and when they saw steam rising from a boiling pot, they would have known that water, ice and steam are distinctive and different and yet are of the same substance. It would not have been, nor is it today, a perfect analogy for the Trinity but it is not a huge leap in conceptual logic either.

It is important to realize that **the doctrine of the Trinity is not a definition of God. It is a way of thinking about God.** And the thought is that the God who created the vast universe, is the same God who entered fully into our human experience (including our death) in Jesus, is the same God who is present with us and among us always and everywhere by the Holy Spirit. The gracious, eternal God who holds the stars in place shares in the joys and the sorrows we bring to this act of worship today. The God who is way above and beyond our wildest imaginations is nearer than the air we breathe.

A Trinitarian God is not a God who sadistically waits for us to step out of line so that he can “zap” us. Nor does he indifferently step aside while we hurtle toward the abyss through our own destructive behaviors. Nor does he indulgently pat us on the head in the midst of our waywardness and say: “There, there now. Never mind. Everything will be all right in the end”. A Trinitarian God is a God who has chosen to come to grips with the human dilemma from inside the experience, and who often can still best be encountered as light in life’s darkest valleys (cf. Psalm 23:4 NRSV).

There is another interesting concept within the context of Trinitarian faith. Many modern scholars have picked up what is a fascinating idea found quite early in the Christian Tradition. It is the concept of the Trinity, not as a hierarchy (with the Father as the boss, the Son as second in line and the Holy Spirit bringing up the rear) but as a community of equals sharing together in a common mission. In this sense it is probably a much more helpful model for the Church than the hierarchical model.

And what is the shared mission of the Trinitarian Community? The redemption of sinful men and women, the redemption of the whole world, indeed the redemption from futility and decay of the entire created order which, as Paul so eloquently declares (Romans 8), awaits that final consummation of all things with “eager longing” (v.19) and “groaning in labor pains” (v.22).

Let us acknowledge and affirm the strong, quiet presence of this God in our worship in the sanctuary and in our service in the world. As the songwriter says:

*This, this is the God we adore,  
Our faithful, unchangeable friend,  
Whose love is as great as his power,  
That neither knows measure nor end.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen