

## **A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist**

**Trinity Sunday 2010**

**The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney**



In my own practice as a preacher I've always thought that there is a primary responsibility to address the texts of scripture set for the day. If people have had to listen to scripture the very least the preacher can do is try to shed some light on it.

The difficulty with Trinity Sunday is that the doctrine of the Trinity is one which the church has derived from a scattering of references to the personhood and the work of God found in scripture. So Trinity Sunday we're challenged to think about theology: to think about the task of reasoning about God and to be reminded that a willingness to do this is part of our calling as Christians.

But as good theologians know, the word 'God' does not refer to anything that the human mind can comprehend, so theological language has at its heart an all-pervasive mystery which haunts human consciousness. The task of theology is like Penelope weaving her shroud – what we weave during the day we must unravel by night. That is why theology is so derided by those who insist that all claims to knowledge must be rooted in rationality and factual evidence.

If we turn the dogma of the Trinity into a description of God that stands for itself, not telling us anything about his relationship to us then we lose its truth and power by losing connection to the act of God out of which it arises. We generate an appearance of knowledge of God which consists merely in words – a constant danger in theology. The New Testament by contrast grounds all its statements about God in the divine action that seizes us. Even today's reading from Proverbs presents wisdom as a person intimately connected with the work of creation. St Paul also understands that this figure is revealed to us in Jesus Christ who is "the power and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1.24).

When we talk of a Trinitarian God we have put aside talk of a God who rules in singularity as an earthly ruler would. Nor do we mean some sort of cold power of providence who determines all and cannot be affected by anything. Rather, we talk of a vision of God as a social God, rich in internal and external relationships.

Jesus' prayer, in the next chapter of John's gospel describes the communion of Jesus with the "Father" not merely as "with each other," or "for each other," but "in each other." "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." Therefore, "whoever sees me, sees the Father," for "I and the Father are one" (John 14: 9-11, 10, 30). It is a unity based in mutual indwelling. The Trinitarian God is a "habitable" God: he allows us to become one within him.

It is only from the perspective of the Trinitarian God that we can claim that we can make one of our most central assertions about God, namely that 'God is Love,' because love means nothing without relationship. Love brings together those who are separate while maintaining their distinct characters. Only from the perspective of the triune God, one can say, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'only a suffering God can help.' The God who is in relationship both with us and for us in his suffering love is the one who can understand us and redeem us.

And when we think about the action of God we're brought to the most significant of God's actions, that which takes place on the cross. As the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote: 'The redemptive cross of Christ is always deeply involved in the divine mystery, but turns it into a *revealed* mystery.'

The famous icon written by Andrei Rublev in the 15th century shows the meeting of Abram and Sarai with the three visitors beneath the tree at Mamre; three visitors who turn out to be angels. Rublev removes the characters of Abram and Sarai from the picture leaving only the angels. He shows the three divine persons seated at a table. In the slight inclination of their heads toward each other and in the gestures of their hands, a deeper unity of the three is suggested. A chalice on the table symbolizes the sacrifice of the Son on Calvary for the redemption of the world.

In Jesus Christ, God has shown not only that he does not want to be God without us, but that he does not want us to be without him. And in the action of the Holy Spirit, the Triune God is present and active among us to hear and answer our prayers, to sustain us in all the happenings of life, and to continuously bring home to us afresh the good news of the Father's sanctifying action in Jesus Christ, guaranteeing our inheritance, and empowering us to live in the reality of being 'holy and blameless' before God (Eph 1:4).

The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history, or enacted sacramentally in our history, so that it becomes story. The historical mission of Jesus is nothing other than the eternal mission of the Son from the Father; the historical outpouring of the Spirit in virtue of the passion, death, and ascension of Jesus is nothing but the eternal outpouring of the Spirit from the

Father through the Son. Watching, so to say, the story of Jesus, we are watching the processions of the Trinity.”

Classical theology understands God not as a being but as the very condition of all being, so that the word "being" is better understood as a verb than a noun. Good theology approaches the question of God not as this or that being, but as the continuous activity of creating and sustaining all being, as the redeemer of creation from within through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and as the revealing love of the holy spirit. To speak of the existence of God in this sense is more like speaking of the existence of love or beauty than of trees or tennis racquets. We say that love exists, not only because it affects our world but also because we look for evidence of its existence in the ways in which people who use that word behave towards one another. Good theology involves doing as well as thinking, for as good theologians we must give material expression to our use of the word "God" in a way that counts as meaningful.

As St Paul reminds us in this morning's passage from the letter to the Romans:

... since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.