

Trinity Sunday (A)

4th June 2023

'The heart of God is Love'

Ex 34: Moses on Sinai

Dan 3: *to you glory and praise for evermore*

2Cor 13: *grace of Lord Jesus Christ, love of God, fellowship of the Holy Spirit*

Jn 3: *God loves the world so much that He gave His only Son*

I don't know about you, but on those occasions when I try to think about God 'in Himself,' just God *in Himself* — when I close my eyes and try to think about that fundamental question, "Why is there something rather than nothing," and think about the invisible and eternal God as the only possible answer to that — then I can suddenly feel overwhelmed. I feel intellectually overwhelmed, but emotionally, too. I suppose it's a reaction to perceiving that that question, and that infinite answer, are so much bigger than my poor finite capacities, and there's a bit of a shudder at the enormity of it. Try it some time! It's an awesome and, in some ways, belittling, thought, or *attempt* at thought. One might almost say, scary. Just think of all created things, and then subtract them out, and all of time and space too, and then think about God alone, God always existing and always there, the sole ground of all being. Gosh. How?!! How is it possible, and yet how can it not be? How awesome! And yet, as we will see, there is an

antidote to its being scary for us, for God is not a monolith of pure being, but He is a Trinity of persons, with all that that implies.

Yes, the great and overwhelming mystery at the centre of all existence is *God the Holy Trinity*, and yet on this festal Sunday we get a 'trinity' of only very short readings: merely 11 vv. adding them all together! The Gospel passage set for this Trinity Sunday is from St John ch. 3, and is short enough for me to quote it again in full for you: a worthwhile exercise, hearing these sacred words repeated:

¹⁶ [Jesus said to Nicodemus]: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

These are famous words — perhaps some of the most famous words in the New Testament — and in effect the 'Gospel in miniature,' summing up the very essence of the

mission of Jesus, the Son of God, sent into the world by the Father, “for God *so loved* the world.”

We keep Trinity Sunday as the first Sunday after Pentecost — the first Sunday after the Easter season has ended — because the mysteries of Holy Week and Easter to Pentecost reveal to us so much about the Godhead, God the ‘Three in One.’ As St John says, here and in several other places, the heart of the Trinity is love — “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). This explains why God the Father creates; it explains why God the Son redeems; it explains why God the Holy Spirit sanctifies: the heart of God the Blessed Trinity is a love that is perfect, and from those loving persons which God is, comes a love that wishes to share His blessed existence ... i.e., with humanity. No wonder, then, that “love makes the world go round,” as the saying has it — love makes us all ‘tick’; real, devoted, generous, self-denying, sacrificial love, is what we all hanker for, and are most happy when giving (the love that makes truly beautiful marriages; the love that makes truly beautiful priests and religious). Yes, love is the foundation

of what it means to be human, because God who made the world, and who gives mankind his *raison-d’être*, is Himself as the Trinity the source, the powerhouse, of love.

I think that this perspective on the Holy Trinity is the one that helps us make perfect sense of what otherwise may be presented as simply a Christian conundrum: *one God, three persons*. We might say, “how can anyone really get their head round that? ... It makes one’s brain hurt!” But if we see it is *essential* to understanding our very existence — God as loving, creative, generous, merciful — then it makes more sense. We can only explain the desire of God to create, and then to redeem, and then to sanctify, by seeing that in fact He has a heart of love, and He can only be loving by being that *communion of persons*. Otherwise we might imagine a ‘solo,’ monolithic Godhead: likely to be selfish, brutish, angry, in need of appeasing ... in other words, loveless. No, that isn’t how God has been revealed to us through salvation history; it isn’t the nature of God as taught to us by Christ, and whom the Spirit inspires us to know and imitate. God has always shown

Himself, from the creation of the world on, to be a God of love, whose love in a very particular sense is lavished on His special creation of body & spirit, that is, ... *us!*

I have a priest friend who wrote his doctorate on aspects of the theology of Karl Rahner, a famous German Jesuit of the 20th c. who contributed much to the theological reflections prior to the Second Vatican Council. I went to the doctoral defence of my friend, in Rome, at the Jesuit University (in the continental system a doctoral defence, 'the *viva*,' is a public occasion!). Rahner is notoriously difficult to understand, but I thought that if I went to Fr Patrick's *viva* I might just come away understanding Rahner a bit better. Well, no ... unfortunately Fr Patrick spoke so fast in the 30mins allotted to him to present his thesis, that I came away none the wiser! But, one thing I do remember from theology lectures about Rahner is his famous maxim: "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and *vice versa*." In other words, God the Trinity as He acts in the world — God's actions in the 'economy of salvation' — is utterly the same

in every detail as the Trinity in Himself. God does not present some different sort of nature to the world than He actually is. He cannot do this, because He is God, and therefore is utterly transparent, absolutely truthful; He does not operate through masks, or pretending, or deceit. God communicates Himself to humanity (the 'economic Trinity') as He really is in the divine Life (the 'immanent Trinity'). So, for example, when St Philip the Apostle says to Jesus, "*Show us the Father, and then we shall be satisfied,*" no wonder Jesus is exasperated: "*Have I been with you all this time, Philip and still you do not know Me? To see Me is to have seen the Father.*" The Father is exactly who Jesus says He is (think of the forgiving Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son); the Holy Spirit is precisely as Jesus describes (think of His words, "*the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything*"). The inner life of God is projected onto the life of the world in His self-revelation without distortion. *We* might distort His message, and distort our reception of the message, but God as He acts, is

God as He is: Father, Son, and Spirit, known to us in the ministry of Jesus, and hinted at often in the Jewish Scriptures of pre-Christian times, too, this is God as He really is, in His rich, inner life of unimaginable love and bliss. Any description of God that neglects or downplays the Trinity is selling humanity short of what He wants us to know and rejoice in. God is one, yes, of course, the one and only; but He is also and always three persons, a communion of giving-and-receiving personal love.

Today, then, as we keep this beautiful feast, let's remember how the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the very heart of all things. It's not just some peculiar expression of Christianity, 'take it or leave it,' — no, it's saying exactly how things really are about God who is the origin of all that exists. As Christians, schooled in the most detailed revelation that God has ever given us, the words and deeds of Jesus the Son, we *must* give honour to God in this Trinitarian way. The Creeds that we recite, and which express our faith succinctly, are structured in a Trinitarian way. When we make our Baptismal promises,

and when we renew them at Easter and other times, we do so along the lines of a Trinitarian formula. In fact, all our prayer, all our thinking about God, all our devotion to Him, is made "*through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with You, the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.*" This is how we conclude many of our Christian prayers: a glorious doxology or formula of praise, expressing again and again, day after day, our appreciation of God who is in Himself the love that made us, and who has planted in our souls the spiritual capacity to love and serve, sacrifice and pray, giving meaning to our lives. We come really alive when we love well, in imitation of the love of God. Let us never forget that: we love, ... we *can* love, ... only because "God is love." And that love has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit, from the Father, because of Jesus the Son who came to dwell amongst us.

Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.