

Sermon - Trinity and Quadrinity

Based on the Gospel for Trinity Sunday, Year A: Matthew 28.16-20, as well as Acts 2.37-47 (from the NRSV)

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

- Last Sunday we celebrated the Pentecost event, which effectively inaugurated the birth of the Church.
- On that day God's Spirit was made tangibly manifest through the sound of a mighty wind, and tongues of fire resting on those who had been regularly praying and meeting together after the resurrection of Jesus, some fifty days before
- This abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit, empowering those first disciples to proclaim the Good News of God's sacrificial love, led scholars to try to sensibly comprehend how God and God's Son and God's Spirit related to each other.
- And so, in acknowledgement of this expanded comprehension of God, today - in the Church's liturgical calendar - we celebrate the Trinity.
- Jesus himself didn't bother unpacking what the Trinity was - and, in fact, the word or name Trinity does not even appear in Holy Scripture.
- Nevertheless, Jesus commissions all disciples - including us participating in this service:
'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.' (Matthew 28.19)
- Now, trying to get one's head around how one God can at the same time be the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit can be mentally very stimulating.
- Many scholars have entertained and argued with each other about this theological concept, and such debates have led, at times, to helpful insights.

The Trinitarian egg

- However, if you are reluctant to wade through such arguments, then I suggest the following simple analogy:
- Imagine a hen's egg: it is one egg, but there are three aspects.
- The visible part is the shell - this is like God the Son, who was visible as the man Jesus.
- The yolk in the centre is like God the Father - in both cases the source of life.
- The egg white, which, like water, is clear and flows, is like the Spirit.
- And the shell has to be broken for the egg white to pour out, and for the yolk to be accessed.
- In the same way Jesus was broken on the cross, and subsequently - after his resurrection - God's Spirit was poured out, so that all could access God the Father.

Love, and light, and life

- There are many different ways to engage with the idea of the Trinity.
- One way is thinking about the function of each person of the Trinity - and so we can talk about the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer, or many variations of that.
- One way that I have found particularly helpful over the last few years is to think of:
 - the love of the Father,
 - the light of Christ, and
 - the life of the Spirit.
- This has led me to comprehend God as the source of all love, of all light, and of all life - such that whenever I encounter and acknowledge love, light or life, I now recognise that I am encountering an aspect of God.
- This has deepened my faith life, and enriched my living.

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- And not mine only, but this kind of comprehension has inspired hymn writers, such as John Bell and Graham Maule, to compose lines such as we sung just now:

*Praise the God who keeps his promise;
praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.*

(from their hymn: Jesus calls us here to meet him - Together in Song (The Australian Hymn Book Company Pty Ltd 1999))

- These words help to make the concept of the Trinity less of a mental exercise, and more of something that is relevant to our daily living.

Introducing the Quadrinity!

- Nevertheless, I have slowly been becoming aware of a significant problem with the concept of the Trinity.
- I don't think the concept is wrong - just inadequate, or incomplete.
- In the first place, I want to revisit a verse that we had from John's Gospel reading on the 6th Sunday of Easter:
- Jesus says to his disciples, as he warns and reassures them about his impending departure: *'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.'* (John 14.16)
- At first glance Jesus implies the Trinity: he refers to himself, as the Son, asking the Father, who will send another Advocate - which is the Holy Spirit.
- However, in that sentence, which is just one convenient example from many references, Jesus names a fourth 'person' in the mix.
- Listen carefully: *'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.'*
- That's right, the fourth person of the Trinity is 'You' - that is, each one of us.
- Now, before you brand me as a heretic, let's explore this a bit.
- Just as John writes a number of times in his first letter, *'God is love'*, so we can also say that fundamentally *'God is relationship'*.
- Love is a dynamic of relationship: it is an aspect of how a person might relate to another person.
- It certainly describes how God relates to us.
- In fact, it is because God is love that God - as love - was compelled by his own nature of love to create us, in order to have someone to love, and to have someone reflect that same love back to Godself.
- From this perspective, God created us to *be* in relationship with him - to *join in* with his Trinitarian relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Actually, this is not a new idea - it has been around for at least 600 hundred years, and possibly much more.
- If we look at Andrej Rublev's icon of the Trinity, it has been suggested that when Rublev wrote this icon in about 1425, he fixed a bit of mirror to the front of the table.
- This story might be confused with the metallic cover that later adorned the icon, but let's stay with the idea of a mirror being intentionally included.
- Thus when the viewer looked at the Trinity seated around the table, they would catch a glimpse of themselves - effectively as the fourth person of the Trinity.
- Maybe this idea should be relabelled as the Quadrinity!

Being confronted

- But, if this suggestion of a mirror being originally part of the icon is true, we can understand why it might have been removed - probably quite early on.

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- The idea of including the viewer as a person in the divine Quadrinity sounds quite blasphemous.
- I guess that Church authorities might have considered it to be presumptuous for anyone to claim to be like Jesus, like the Son of God - such an idea is clearly being overly prideful.
- However, such an attitude by the authorities overlooks the point that we are *not* trying to make ourselves equal to God, but rather acknowledging that God has made himself equal to us, through his Son Jesus Christ.

- And I suggest, that if this possibility of a mirror being part of the original icon is true, that there would have been another reason for this proving to be very unsettling and discomfoting to viewers:
- Imagine realising that God is including you in the Quadrinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and You.
- Or, if each person is thinking it through for themselves: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Me.
- This is confronting in two ways.
- Firstly, it suggests that God is including you - is including each one of us - in his divine dynamic, his divine relationship.
- This means comprehending the faith relationship that God invites us into with him as being divinely personal.
- Well, I think that *that* is fundamentally true.
- And fundamentally awesome, and truly fearful.

- And it is confronting in a second way.
- It suggests that God is counting on you - on each one of us - to step up to our divine responsibility, and participate with God in his work in the world.
- And I think that *this* is fundamentally true, as well.

Pentecost as a direct consequence of the Quadrinity

- Because this is exactly what the Pentecost event initiated.
- God's Spirit became connected to each of the followers of Jesus as they prayed together, and through them became manifest to the gathering crowd.
- God's Spirit inspired Peter to share the Good News with the crowd, and encouraged the crowd to respond, as we heard from today's reading from Acts.
- And then what happened? We read verses 41 and 42 from chapter 2:
So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2.41-42)
- This incredible start to the Church took place not because of the Trinity, but because of the Quadrinity!
- The disciples, after weeks of praying together, finally stepped up to the Great Commission of Jesus - finally stepped up to the responsibility of being part of the divine dynamic of Father, Son, Holy Spirit and them - and were then inspired, empowered, and enabled by God to be channels and facilitators and the means through which God grew his kingdom.

The Quadrinity at St John's

- And God is still calling people - people like you and me - to be participants in the Quadrinity - to be part of the relationship of divine love - to make God's love real, and to enact God's kingdom.
- Over the next five Sundays we will continue to explore, through stories from the Book of Acts, the Missional aspects of our Church, as we go through the 5 Marks of Mission.

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- And shortly, in our service now, we will be commissioning our own parish's Mission Action Team - who are tasked with helping us, as part of God's Church, to engage with God both including us in the Trinity and counting on us to include the Trinity in how we live and express our faith, as part of the community of God.

May our Creator God make his love known in and through us;
May our Teacher God encourage us in following his way; and
May our Inspiring God empower us to be responsive to his call. Amen.