

THE GOODNESS OF TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE

Isaiah 6. 1-8
Romans 8. 12-17
John 3. 1-17

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The first thing to say about the doctrine of the Trinity is that we Christians should not be ashamed of it. Many Christians will speak easily about Jesus; some will speak of the power of the Spirit; and many more will talk about ‘God’ and about love, justice and peace; but when it comes to the Trinity, one detects an embarrassed silence. The Trinity, considered to be a difficult and obscure concept, is often treated as if it had little to do with real Christian life.

This is not true, of course. We do the world no favours when we avoid talking about Christian doctrine, and particularly about the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, it is good for the world. We need not apologise for it. To the contrary, we should own it boldly. In the next few moments, I would like to share with you my effort to do so, and to encourage you to do the same.

The Trinity is God, and the doctrine of the Trinity is what God has revealed to us about himself. God exists in three identities, which are called Persons. However, these Persons are not individuals, but are one Being. This is a fantastic teaching, one that is frankly beyond what the human mind can grasp. Christian doctrine stretches us towards the amazing trinitarian truth of God-in-himself.

In addition to the revelation of who God is in himself, the doctrine of the Trinity also claims that God chooses to *relate himself* to the world that he makes. At the beginning of the Creed, we refer to God, ‘the Father almighty, maker of heaven and

earth'. Our God is the giver of existence, the one who makes me be, and you be, and this island of Guernsey be, and everything else be. God makes it all. He is somewhat like the author of a story, and in fact 'authorship' is a good way to think about creation. God creates out of nothing, by which we mean there is nothing in the world that causes the world to be.

What God has done, however, is not only create the world; he has desired (so he tells us) from the very beginning also to be a creature within the world. This author desired to be a character in the story he was writing. 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life' (Jn 3. 16).

And there is still more. Not only is God the creator of the story; and not only has God desired to be a character in the story; God has so loved the world that he wants the story to be a good one. He wants things to turn out well in the end. God does not want this world to be nothing more than sound and fury, signifying nothing; he wants this world to be meaningful. And so God gives the Holy Spirit as the promise that there is a future, and that he is there too, as the future.

All of this could be written as a story of God; and while God in himself is beyond our comprehension, strange and awesome in his eternal changelessness, God as related to us does have a story, because he has given us a story and put himself in it.

A robust and unashamed proclamation of the Trinity has practical implications for us. Allow me to share two examples.

Firstly, the Trinity has practical implications concerning prayer. When the Trinity is taught, *prayer makes sense*; and without the Trinity, prayer is nonsense. You see, when

you and I pray, we are *within God's own triune being*, and we participate in the divine communications that constitute God's being.

As St Paul wrote in today's appointed epistle, 'you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that *very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit* that we are children of God' (Rom 8. 15-16). God's Holy Spirit has been given to us, and he dwells within us. Our prayer is actually the voice of the Spirit¹ joined to ours, rising up to address Abba, Father; it is an address that is done through the Son. When we pray, we are in the midst of these divine communications, which are the dynamics of God's own Being. And therefore for Christians, there is no problem of how a creature can speak to its creator; there is no problem of a character in the story trying to address the author. There is no problem, because God has given himself (his Holy Spirit) to us. God is all at once the Giver, the Gift, and the Goal.

Secondly, the Trinity has practical implications concerning hope. The doctrine of the Trinity *secures for us the great Christian virtue of hope*. It is our *hope* that the story of the universe will turn out to be a story of love rather than hate; that in the end all forms of injustice will be unmasked and revealed for what they are, and decisively conquered for good; and that when this happens (that is to say when our Lord returns from heaven to judge the quick and the dead), we *hope* to find that our own lives, small as they may be in the cosmic picture, are nevertheless lives that have a good story, a story of good. It is our *hope* that our lives will turn out well in the end; that we will see God; that we will move and live, and have our being ever thereafter caught up in the unending dance of the divine Trinity.

Where will this be? It will be where our Lord has gone in his Ascension. The Ascension of Christ, of course, was not a trip into outer space. Heaven is not in

¹ He is the Spirit of Adoption, who makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus, who also prayed, 'Abba, Father'.

some distant part of the universe. Heaven exists in relation to this world as an author's physical world exists in relation to the world that the author creates. When Jesus ascended, he brought with him (as Christian doctrine boldly claims) both his body and soul into heaven. This means that the created world (or one piece of it, namely, our Lord's physical body) was taken up into God's own being, the 'place' of the uncreated. What marvellous symmetry this is! At the Incarnation, the author entered the story, the Word took flesh and came to be amongst us, and to be one of us. At the Ascension, the opposite movement occurs: the story enters the author, the marriage of earth and heaven is consummated, and our hope is given its location.

Dear friends, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is good for the world. It grounds our hope. It shows how prayer is possible. It tells us the truth about God. Let us not be in any way ashamed about doctrine, but rather let us proclaim boldly that we believe in the holy and undivided Trinity.

Blessing and honour and thanksgiving and praise, more than we can utter, more than we can conceive, be to you, most holy and glorious Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all people, all creatures, for ever and ever.

Amen.