

HOME RETREAT SATURDAY 29 MAY 2021

LIVING IN THE LIFE OF THE TRINITY

Good morning. My title is living in the life of the Trinity. These Saturday retreat talks are, of course, to state the obvious retreat talks and that means that they are not catechesis, still less Christian Doctrine lectures. My aim, my hope, is that by the end of this talk, I will have given you some encouragement and support to pray, and even indeed, to live in the Holy Trinity. And so I am going to begin, by taking the collect of tomorrow's Mass, which is Trinity Sunday, as the opening prayer for this talk and as inspiration:

God our Father, who by sending into the world the Word of truth and the Spirit of sanctification made known to the human race your wondrous mystery, grant us, we pray, that in professing the true faith, we may acknowledge the Trinity of eternal glory and adore your Unity, powerful in majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen

Mass, as many other liturgical celebrations, begins with an invocation of the Trinity of three persons – ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ and concludes with a Trinitarian blessing. This invocation comes in the Bible at the end of St Matthew's Gospel and it will be in the Gospel reading tomorrow: ‘Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time’. This is the only biblical instance of this particular formula, though the names, together or maybe more often individually, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit occur very frequently in the pages of the New Testament.

I will return to the Scripture, but for the moment I need to acknowledge that as a doctrine, the doctrine celebrated tomorrow, it was worked out as a teaching only in the early history of the Church and then with a good deal of argument and controversy. This is not the place to outline the history, let alone to expand on it, nor I suppose am I specialist enough. Here is a simple explanation: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is one God, is one singular pronoun: so let us worship him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; there is no doctrine more majestic and more an unfathomable mystery.

Now here is something a little less simple; it comes from a document called the ‘Athanasian creed’ which gives a flavour of the developed doctrine. It was not in

fact composed by St Athanasius in the 4th century, but more likely comes from the 5th or 6th centuries. It begins in an imposing way:

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith unless every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal; but one eternal.

It continues in this vein. And maybe it seems a bit steep and not much of a warm encouragement to prayer and adoration. To say the least. Indeed it may seem to be the sort of thing that Lewis Carroll (whose real name was Charles Dodgson, an Anglican clergyman) was tilting at in a famous passage from *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there*.

“I can’t believe that!” said Alice. “Can’t you?” the queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again, draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.” Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.” “I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

So Lewis Carroll and *Through the Looking Glass*. And so for many people Christian belief in general and doctrines like the Trinity in particular. Believing impossible things. Three Persons One God; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

There is a later medieval legend about St Augustine of Hippo which makes a similar point. While Augustine was working on his book *On the Trinity*, he was walking by the sea one day, meditating on the difficult problem of how God could be three Persons at once. He came upon a little child. The child had dug a little hole in the sand, and with a small seashell was scooping water from the sea into the small hole. Augustine watched him for a while and finally asked the child what he was doing. The child answered that he would scoop all the water from the sea and

pour it into the little hole in the sand. 'What?' Augustine said. 'That is impossible. Obviously, the sea is too large and the hole too small.' 'Indeed,' said the child, 'but I will sooner draw all the water from the sea and empty it into this hole than you will succeed in penetrating the mystery of the Holy Trinity with your limited understanding.' Augustine turned away in amazement and when he looked back the child had disappeared.

Well let me at this point interject two thoughts. The first is despite these stories to invite you, if this proves to be a style of praying that helps you, nonetheless to take the statement of the doctrine of the Trinity such as in the Athanasian creed and to meditate upon it. Maybe treat it as a sort of Christian 'koan'. A koan is a Zen Buddhist term for a paradoxical statement which demonstrates the inadequacy of logical reasoning, but which nonetheless can provoke enlightenment. It is never something that someone else can do for you.

My second thought is maybe a little less extreme. It is to suggest that for the early Church and for the Catholic Church down the centuries, the impossible thing is not to believe in the Trinity, but is in fact the other way round. It is impossible for the Church *not* to believe in the Trinity. And there is not a bad method there that when you have excluded all alternatives what you are left with must be true, even if you cannot fully comprehend it. Even if all you are left with is, as St Paul puts in his first letter to the Corinthians, puzzling reflections in a mirror and not sight face to face. Or as Newman put it in one of his later sermons, "Now while we address each Person, Father Son and Holy Spirit, in devotion as the One God, we may leave it to the next world how Each of Three can be the one God".

At the risk of being over telescopic about the development of the understanding of the Trinity, what seems to happen is that there is an experience of Jesus and of the Spirit, an experience of Jesus' words and deeds, of what happened to him and this leads to reflection and the reflection leads to belief and the belief leads to doctrine and the doctrine leads to the Creed, which we say so often at Mass. The doctrine is that we cannot think of either the Jesus the Son or of the Holy Spirit other than of them being God, but nor can we think of there being more than one God. But in this whole process, in this reflection, this belief, this doctrine and this Creed there is still this experience, this experience of Jesus and of the Spirit, which is essentially an invitation to us.

I think we can see this already in St Mark's Gospel, generally thought to be the earliest, where for example Jesus stills the storm at sea, which in the Old Testament is explicitly something only God can do and where he is perceived or experienced

by the people to teach not just about God but with the authority of God, as God. This develops in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but is most clear in the gospel of John. St John begins by saying that Jesus is the Word, who is with God and who is God and ends by reporting the actual address of St Thomas, doubting Thomas, to the risen Jesus 'my Lord and my God'. It is in St John too that Jesus says that it is good for the disciples for Jesus to go because then they will receive the most intimate gift of the Spirit, another Advocate. This was all a foundational experience.

I want now, nearing the end of my allotted time, to relate this foundational experience to prayer. A place where this is done very clearly is in the passage from the letter of St Paul to the Romans chapter 8, which will be the second reading at Mass tomorrow, when Paul says that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts enabling us, to cry out "Abba, Father". 'Abba Father' - the words of Jesus according to Mark in that most intimate and desperate moment of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: 'Abba, Father! For you everything is possible, Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I would have it.' So therefore Paul is saying that in the Spirit, we may make these intimate and desperate words of Jesus our own, addressed to the Father. We believe in the Trinity because we experience it in a white-knuckle sort of way, when with Jesus in the power of the Spirit we make our own his desperate prayer to the Father. Another example comes in John chapter 14: there Jesus says "Anyone who loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home in him". These are the most astonishing words. The Holy Trinity wants to make his home in us; he, as it were, knocks at our door and we are invited to give him entry. There is room in us for God.

Those who experience even the beginnings, the first stirrings of what that can mean, know that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. And that mystery is self-giving love. It is a self-giving love which constitutes them, the divine Persons, as one, one God seeking to be one God in us.

A final quotation from the medieval Franciscan theologian St Bonaventure, which we read on his feast day: "If you want to understand how this happens, ask it of grace, not of learning, ask it of desire, not of understanding, ask it of earnest prayer, not of attentive reading; ask it of the betrothed, not of the teacher, ask it of God, not of man, ask it of darkness not of radiance. Ask it not of light, but of a fire that completely inflames you and transports you to God.

So a *concluding prayer*, borrowing from St Bonaventure

Almighty God, Holy Trinity, give us the grace, the desire, the earnest prayer, the betrothal, the divine power, the mystery, the fire of your love, enabling us to open the door of our hearts to your indwelling. Amen.