

Trinity Sunday

3rd June 2012

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8: 12-17; John 3: 1-17

John Dunnill

In the name of the One God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've been having a bit to do with doctors recently and from them I've learned a very useful word: cryptogenic. It comes from *kryptos*, meaning secret or unknown, as in 'cryptic'; and *genesis* of course relates to the origin of things. So, if something's the matter and they don't know why they say you have a cryptogenic disorder. It sounds like an explanation, but it only means they haven't got one.

But it's a useful word because there are many things that happen and we don't know why. In fact you could say we live in a cryptogenic universe. Here we are, but why? And where does life come from? These questions are there to puzzle us. So let me begin with a story about a girl with a very active mind. She's talking to her Nanny, or Nurse.

EXPLAINED by AA Milne

Elizabeth Ann
Said to her Nan:
"Please will you tell me how God began?
Somebody must have made Him. So
Who could it be, 'cos I want to know?"
And Nurse said, "Well!"
And Ann said, "Well?
I know you know, and I wish you'd tell."
And Nurse took pins from her mouth, and said,
"Now then, darling, it's time for bed."

Elizabeth Ann
Had a wonderful plan:
She would run round the world till she found a man
Who knew exactly how God began.

She got up early, she dressed, and ran
Trying to find an Important Man.
She ran to London and knocked at the door
Of the Lord High Doodalum's coach-and-four.
"Please, sir (if there's anyone in),

However-and-ever did God begin?"

The Lord High Doodalum lay in bed,
But out of the window, large and red,
Came the Lord High Coachman's face instead.
And the Lord High Coachman laughed and said:
"Well, what put that in your quaint little head?"

Elizabeth Ann went home again
And took from the ottoman Jennifer Jane.
"Jenniferjane," said Elizabeth Ann,
"Tell me at once how God began."
And Jane, who didn't much care for speaking,
Replied in her usual way by squeaking.

What did it mean? Well, to be quite candid,
I don't know, but Elizabeth Ann did.
Elizabeth Ann said softly, "Oh!
Thank you Jennifer. Now I know."

It's a poem about the most important question of all: Who is GOD? Or as she puts it, Where does God come from? How does God begin?

It's about the questions children ask, and the answers that adults (parents, teachers, clergy) often fail to give, while mostly not admitting that they don't know. So Elizabeth Ann gets no answer out of her Nurse, or Nanny, nor out of those Important Men she puts such faith in, with the grandest titles she can think of – the Lord High Doodalum, and the Lord High Coachman. If she gets any answer at all to her question about God she gets it from her favourite doll, Jennifer Jane, and she gets it in squeaking, without words.

Maybe, when it comes to GOD, it is words that get in the way. The philosopher Wittgenstein said famously, "What we cannot speak about, about that we must be silent". There are limits to human language – things we can't describe – and GOD is surely one of them.

And yet on Trinity Sunday it is right to talk as directly as possible about GOD and the nature of God. There is a very old tradition of celebrating the Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday, a day to give thanks for the wonder of GOD who is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But often people seem to find the doctrine of the Holy Trinity a problem, rather than something to celebrate. They say, for example: How can God be three and one at the same time? – it doesn't make sense. Or they say: Isn't the Trinity a later invention, something added on to what's in the Bible, not a necessary part of Christian belief? Or they say: Isn't it just a piece of speculation, a theory? – for how can we know what GOD is really like?

These are all fair questions, but none of them go very far. Is it impossible for something to be three things and one thing at the same time? St Patrick explained the

idea of the Trinity in ancient Ireland using a shamrock, a small plant which has three leaves: it is three (leaves) and one (plant) at the same time. And you can say the same about any of us: each of us may be a Father or Mother (to our children), a Son or Daughter (to our parents), and a Husband or Wife (to our spouse), and more, for we all have many roles but remain one person.

Of course these are simple analogies which can't be pressed too far, and when we talk about GOD we have to say more carefully in what sense GOD is One and in what sense GOD is Three. So it was several centuries before the Church felt it had defined its terms carefully enough to say what it means to call GOD a Trinity – but the teaching, as I shall show, was there from the beginning.

And Trinity Sunday is placed here, after Pentecost, because what it celebrates is not an abstract idea of God but the knowledge of God revealed in the Christian story, as we spell it out through the first half of the Christian year from Advent through Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost: incarnation, cross, resurrection, the sending of the Spirit. And so that teaching is not a piece of theory or speculation (though we can make theories about it, like anything else): it is rooted in the Christian experience of salvation.

I want to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is not at all some fancy theory or added extra – it is the distinctive Christian teaching about GOD. Misunderstandings arise because the Church has not always kept the threefold character of GOD at the centre of its preaching. In fact, many would say it is the Church's failure to preach GOD as Trinity that leads directly to atheism in the modern world. Atheism is very largely a Christian heresy: you don't find it in Hinduism, you don't find it in Islam. It's when the Church preaches a God that can't be believed in – then atheistic protest like that of Richard Dawkins is the result. But it is not the true Christian God he is attacking.

The failure goes back a long way, about 800 years, to the beginnings of science, as people came to look for truth not in spiritual things but in their own observation and reasoning, and when theologians separated two ways of talking about GOD. They separated reasoning about God – how God must be, for example, One, Perfect and Pure – from the understanding of God derived from Scripture and experienced in worship and life – as Father, Son and Spirit.

The first of these, the way of reason, was pursued in the new universities just coming into being at that time, along with observations in geography, astronomy and physics, while the other went on in the churches. The separation between these two ways grew until in 1834 the protestant theologian Schleiermacher wrote a book – a complete theology about God and creation and redemption and everything – which had the doctrine of the Trinity not in the chapter on 'God' but in the last chapter, effectively as an appendix at the end – something that was not necessary for faith at all, but an added extra, for anyone still curious after wading through 600 pages.

This sidelining of the Trinity in favour of a rational understanding of God as One is largely a Protestant distortion. It didn't affect Catholic theology in the same way, where spiritual theology was kept alive in the monasteries and in the Eucharist, and it

has never affected Eastern orthodox theology at all. It represents theology selling out to secular philosophy.

But it's more than an academic matter. It's a distortion which has affected Western culture hugely, and has brought about a split between the way our culture as a whole thinks about God (as One God, the Creator, who cannot really be known) and the lived Christian experience of salvation in relationship with the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

The Christian faith is about the offer and acceptance of a lived relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a friendship leading us from death to life, and to still richer life. This lived knowledge of God is written all over the New Testament, sometimes as a twofold experience – as when St Paul begins his letter to the Galatians: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father AND the Lord Jesus Christ" [Gal 1: 3] – and sometimes threefold, as when he ends his second letter to the Corinthians: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ AND the love of God AND the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" [2 Cor 13: 13].

Today's New Testament readings from Romans and John's Gospel both explore (without offering any theory) how the Spirit draws us into the saving relationship with God the Father that Christ the Son has made possible. They are not offering formal statements or definitions but simply showing what it means to believe three ways in one God – where 'believing' means not what we think but how we live.

And what the New Testament shows agrees with what we find in the Old Testament. The God of Israel was always a saving God, a God perceived to act in human lives to help people: guiding Abraham, making covenants with Moses, giving laws. And the God of Israel was always both mysterious and self-revealing. God is unseen, but always speaking directly as he did to Isaiah ("I saw the Lord, high and lifted up"!) OR through his Spirit, or through messengers, angels. So God is one, but comes to be known in different ways: and ultimately, of course, in Jesus Christ God takes shape, becomes incarnate in a human life.

The God who can't be known – because GOD is always beyond our imagining – is always seeking to be known, always initiating relationships of trust – with Israel, with the Church, with you and me. As the *Cloud of Unknowing* says, "By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never." What the mind cannot grasp can be known in the heart. And St Paul says the same: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" [Rom 8: 14]; in union with Jesus we come to call God 'Abba' as Jesus did; we are drawn into adoption as his sons and daughters.

Our Gospel is that God is love, and that God reveals that love for us through the sending of the Son and the Spirit. So when we say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit we are saying that God does not *do* love, God *is* love.

GOD is in God's-self a relationship of love: love given, love responding, love transforming. And God enables us to enter into that way of love by sharing in the life

of the Spirit, who calls us to live into a vision of a wider life for the sake of others and, like Jesus, to choose that life even at a cost. That's God's way of love.

If we try to think about God without living in the relationship that God offers us, we will produce a thin and abstract idea of God out of our own heads: a distant abstract Creator God who we can't know or love, or else a rather silly picture of God as an old man sitting on a cloud – a God whose existence explains nothing and might as well be dispensed with.

But if we begin with Christ and what Christ has done, and ask what kind of GOD do we see in Jesus Christ? – then we see God in the human life of Jesus, giving himself wholly to take away our sadness and our sin; and we see the loving Father of our Lord, who wholly desires our good; and we see the Spirit of grace poured into our hearts: the Trinity of love.

That is why the mystery of GOD – which the human mind cannot grasp, but is revealed as Father, Son and Spirit – may be made known to a child very simply, in the silence of love between herself and her doll.

So finally –

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And took from the ottoman Jennifer Jane.
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"Tell me at once how God began."
And Jane, who didn't much care for speaking,
Replied in her usual way by squeaking.

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