

The Triune God

A reflection on our journey through the transient forms of our earthly existence to the One eternal source of all life, to shalom.

“This is the Catholic Faith : that we worship Godhead in Trinity, and Trinity in unity” (Athanasian Creed).

This belief is expressed as three persons in one God, which is bit of a conundrum. After all we learned in school that ‘Three into one does not go’. Then, too, in our philosophies we think of a person as a self standing, independent individual. That might make this teaching look like maintaining belief in three Gods.

Treating it, in this way, as an intellectual question, does not take us very far and seems to raise insuperable difficulties. One cannot expect our congregations to have a detailed knowledge of the philosophies which were part of the cultures in the context of which Christians began to reflect intellectually and express their understanding of themselves, their place in the world and their relationship to the One who is the source of all life and goodness and beauty. It is important, then, to notice that the Athanasian Creed puts faith in the context of worship i.e. of relationship, of religious practice and experience.

Our bible begins with God’s involvement in the activity of creation. There is no reflection on God before creation. What we have here is the language of myth and metaphor. We begin our journey to understanding with images and pictures, another mode of knowing and expressing our world view about ourselves, our world and the One who is the ongoing source of all being, all life, all truth, goodness and beauty. Note that the first line of Genesis reads: “When God initially created the heavens and the earth”. As one Jewish source puts it, the first Hebrew letter is closed behind and open in front. Out of that opening comes that very orderly and stylised account of the six days of creation, after which God rested. In days 1-3 God created the basic elements of creation – the firmament, the earth and the sea – it is a work of separation and dividing, bringing order into the formless matter that existed before. Thereafter, in days 4-6 God populated these regions and God rested on the seventh day. There are the repeated formulae: ‘God said’, ‘it was so’, and ‘God saw that it was good’. Finally God saw all that God had made and it was very good’.

Perhaps our understanding has been that a distant God created all that came into existence there in the beginning and then God rested because it was complete, even perfect. The task was done and we have a very static picture of creation. It was all there, completed at one moment in the past. We have the picture of a distant God, an uninvolved God, omniscient, all powerful. Rather, what is being expressed in these pictures is that the One is the source of all in every moment of our finite existence, which is lived in a journey through time. Especially if we proceed into chapter 2-3 of Genesis, with its image of God the potter forming ‘Adam’ from the dust of the ground and breathing in life, we have a God who is involved in our world and with us: A God who enters into conversation with Adam and even has him give names to the creatures. There is no space to explore this further but what is being expressed is the experience that all we have comes from God and the realisation of God’s involvement with us.

In Deuteronomy 6:4 we have what became the Jewish prayer called the ‘Shema’: “Hear Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord our one God; and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” However, Israel’s images of God do not picture God as a lonely object but as surrounded with the heavenly court, who are in attendance. There are the concepts

of divine wisdom, the divine Logos, exalted patriarchal figures, angel figures. Often we find that one of these has been chosen as God's special agent. Take one example from Proverbs, chapter 8. There, Wisdom, a personified figure, is pictured at the crossroads, calling out to all human kind. She offers her curriculum vitae. She bestows knowledge and discretion; Kings and rulers rule through her; riches and honour are her gift. With echoes, perhaps, of the Genesis text she is pictured as the first of God's works, at his side each day, and delighting in humankind. These figures did not weaken Israel's strict monotheism – they never replaced God but were God's agents and stressed the power and presence of the one God. On this basis Jesus of Nazareth was seen by his followers, after his death and resurrection, as God's special agent. We misunderstand if we treat the power and presence of God in the man of Nazareth as a one off, unique incarnation of the God head. The incarnation principle runs tight through our bibles. It is there in Genesis 1, where the 'initially' or the 'In the beginning' of v1 is, not a beginning at some point in time, but the entry of the Godhead into our space – time as the formless matter is shaped into the formed and ever developing world that we know.

It is important to take account of religious experience in new religious movements which often arise as an innovative interpretation of an established religious tradition due to religious experience. The innovation among Jewish Christians was that the figure of Jesus became an object of devotion and prayer in the cult of early Jewish Christians. There was then a binarian (twofold) aspect to early Christian devotion. Note that at this stage I am talking of devotion and religious practice, not later intellectual speculations.

These later speculations were the necessary result of the monotheistic commitment of Jewish Christians and their devotional tradition which was now also directed to Jesus.

Basic to what I am saying is that our experience of God is always 'incarnational'. We have no knowledge of the Godhead in itself but only of what we experience in our world. Obviously we cannot encounter a power and name it God without forming some image or concept of what divinity is like in itself. The question later had to be asked 'Was there a disembodied Son in the divinity who pre-existed Jesus of Nazareth?' 'Was there a disembodied Spirit who was divine?'

Ask first what was the experience of God to which the early Christians responded? It was to Jesus of Nazareth as God's special agent. In his death and Resurrection (which took place at the cross) that Jesus lets loose his spirit into the world. We see that in the Pentecost scene in the Acts of the Apostles and in Paul's teaching on the symbol of the Body of Christ. The risen Jesus is a divine or life giving spirit present in the lives of his followers; that Spirit which believers experience as the source and power of their new life and new relationship with God. Resurrection, Lordship, being Spirit (more abstractly, the divinity of Jesus) are all ways of claiming the incarnation of God, the presence of the one God with us.

There has been a library of books speculating about the nature of the Trinity and many theories. The above, setting the question firmly in experience and worship, seems to me the richest, the most accessible approach and certainly the best starting point. This is not to say that the efforts, through the centuries, to read that experience back into the inner nature of divinity is wrong, just that from an intellectual point of view it does not take us very far. We know that we experience, not the Godhead in itself, but the power of God present in our lives.

I began by saying that the Athanasian Creed is in a context of worship and relationship. In Genesis 2:2-3 we read: "*And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.*"

So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation". There is no mention of Sabbath as such. However, the text on the making of the Tent of Meeting and the paraphernalia of worship in the Book of Exodus has so many echoes of the

Genesis creation text that an intentional link is being made. What is being ritually celebrated in a multivalent symbolism is the power and presence of God in creation, a turning to the One who is the source of all truth, goodness and beauty, as we journey responsibly towards the shalom of God, the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21. For Christians part of the ritual celebration looks to Jesus of Nazareth, God's agent, and the spirit that he has been let loose in our world at his death and resurrection – a Spirit that continues to work through our lives and through our communities to build up the Body of Christ. In the liturgical cycle we engage more fully with the God who is 'God with us'.

Our knowledge of God is incarnational but the following quote suggests that the speculative peering into the being of God is still a rich source of meditation. It is from a book of blessings by John O'Donohue in a section where he is writing on states of the heart:

“In Christian belief God is not a lonely divine object; rather God is where self and other, the one and the many come together. God is three persons in a kinetic flow of originating, enduring and completing love. The father generates the Son, and both together create the Spirit who is the third force where their knowing, narrative and memory unite. The first heart is the sacred heart.”

Likewise, the following poem by the Irish poet, Cathal O Searcaigh, offers a portrait of the God revealed in creation in images which are so evocative:

“Here in the hollow of the mountains
it is more peaceful than a country chapel.
I walk, cap in pocket, silently
down the mossy carpet of the aisle
down between the grass clump pews,
and at the altar height, stand a moment,
while a faint breeze – the altar boy-
dispenses heather incense everywhere.

Yet in this mountain chapel there's no talk
Of rule or regulation and I'm not plagued
by the brutal piety of the pulpit
threatening those who err with torment.
This is no God of tears or God of thorns,
God of tyranny or God of mercy,
this God I am now looking at
but a God indifferent to my hindrance or my help.
Here it is with his life rather than his words
that whatever God there is makes himself known;
ignoring signs of reverence, veneration.
The source of all energy. Creator of the elements.
Enough for him to stir, blossom
And push towards the light in every new grown shoot.
His joy is the lustre of every colour,
He gives life to the air around me with his life.

With every breath I take
I breathe him from the pure air
As fresh as new baked bread, as cool as wine.
(Quoted in Mackey 2006)

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