

15 June 2019

**Life Overflowing (John 16: 12-15)**

The Feast of Trinity © Sarah Bachelard

This week we celebrate the Feast of the Trinity – which is really the culmination of the whole season of Easter as the church calendar imagines and symbolically represents it. The sequence goes like this: after Easter Sunday come forty days, which correspond to the forty days in which the risen Jesus is said to have appeared bodily to his disciples. Then comes the Ascension, when according to Luke, Jesus is taken from their sight in a cloud (Acts 1: 9) and no longer appears in human form on the earth. Ten days later comes the Day of Pentecost which we celebrated last week, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the gathered community and commissions them to continue Christ’s ministry. The feast of Trinity sums up the transformation this whole sequence has effected. It’s a transformation in the way we know God, *and* a transformation in the possibilities of human community. From now on, in Christian imagination, God cannot be conceived apart from Jesus and the Spirit, cannot be conceived except as an endlessly generative relationship of loving, self-giving in whose life we too are called to share.

Over this whole season of Easter, we’ve been focusing particularly on how the gospel of John understands this transformation. We’ve looked at John’s emphasis on the promise of union or communion with God and with other people; we’ve noted some of his key metaphors and concepts, including the image of moving from darkness to light, the notion of Jesus working the works of God, the significance of believing or trusting as an access for participating in divine life. Tonight, in this last of our reflections in this series, I want to focus on one more cluster of images in John – images to do with abundance and uncontainability, of the overflowing of God’s life and the inexhaustible fullness of God’s truth.

Twice the writer of John explicitly says that the story of Jesus overflows the bounds of the gospel text. At the end of chapter 20, we read: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which **are not written** in this book'. His deeds exceed what's written down. 'But these are written', it goes on, 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (20: 30-31). At the end of the next chapter, the sense of Jesus overflowing the bounds gets even stronger. The final words of the whole gospel are: 'But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (21: 24-25). So here it's not just that the story of Jesus goes beyond what is written or could be written down; it's that if it *were* to be written down, 'the world itself could not contain the books'. In other words, John seems to be saying that the event of Jesus doesn't simply overflow the text of the gospel; it overflows the world itself.

This explicit statement of Jesus' uncontainability within the world resonates with many of the words attributed to him in the course of his ministry. In John's account of the raising of Lazarus, for example, Jesus proclaims himself unlimited by death: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (11: 25-27). Earlier, he has promised, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (10: 10), and earlier still, he's told the Samaritan woman at the well, that he can give her 'living water' welling up with her, 'a fountain of water gushing up to eternal life' (4: 14). In all these sayings, there's a consistent sense of excess, superabundance – as if through Jesus, the limits of finite life are being expanded, becoming saturated by the infinite life of God, which has come in him to dwell among us, 'full' (says John) 'of grace and truth' (1: 14).

I love this set of images. And if this is how Jesus is, if this is what he comes to offer at the human level, then two immediate and significant corollaries seem to

follow. One is that as individuals, as communities and even as whole cultures it may be that we're not immediately capable of hearing all that he has to say, or receiving all the life, all the freedom he has to give. We may not be ourselves big enough or a flexible enough 'container'; we may not yet be able to integrate or even recognise what's on offer. You might have heard the phrase 'capacity building' – it's often used in aid or welfare sectors. It's the idea that before you pour a whole lot of money or goods into a particular community, you might need to spend some time building that community's capacity to receive the gift, to know how to manage it or expend it or make use of it. For without some expansion of receptive capacity, the gift literally cannot be received and cannot help – in fact, it may end up being destructive.

I think this is a helpful way to relate to Jesus' words, as he farewells his disciples. 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now'. It's not that he's holding out on them; it's just that he knows they can't yet hear or 'bear' all that he wants to tell them. They've got no place to 'put' it in their hearts or minds, and no capacity to integrate it into their lives. Already, Jesus' disciples have come a long way with him, but we human beings can only grow so fast. The transformation of memory, understanding and desire necessarily takes time. And Jesus doesn't seem particularly anxious about the time it takes: 'When the Spirit of truth comes', he says, he will guide you into all the truth' ... there's no deadline imposed, no cut off point by which the fullness must be encompassed. Just the promise of his continued presence to guide, expand, deepen their capacity for life and truth, for the Spirit, says Jesus, 'will take what is mine and declare it to you'.

But if this is right, it suggests in turn that there's no end to the growth we're called to. Discipleship of Jesus involves a living responsiveness to a living word, that overflows the text that testifies to it, and overflows even the world into which it is born. We never get to the end of God's truth or God's gift – there can be no human appropriation of God that is fixed, definitively settled, to be statically repeated or obeyed, let alone violently imposed on others. In the Christian vision, truth is

emergent. To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit opens us to the infinite life of God indwelling us, expanding us from within, creating space, revealing self-deception or blockage, healing fear and defendedness and so enabling us to receive more life, bear more truth, shine more light.

Among other things, this means we should expect that we and our theology will be transformed over a life-time, and that our understanding of what it means to live well and faithfully may also radically change. Already in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit was active to reveal new and unexpected truth to the first Christian communities, as she expanded their capacity to recognise the Gentiles as equally children of God with the people of Israel. In our day, it seems to me, this dynamic has implications for how the church approaches questions that continue to bedevil it in relation to such issues as gender equality and identity, same sex attraction and marriage equality. At a minimum, the recognition of God's truth as emergent means that a simple appeal to what the text of the Bible says about anything is not the end of the Christian argument: hear again what Jesus said: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and will declare to you the things that are to come'.

Trinitarian faith proclaims that Jesus came among us as the finite embodiment of God's infinite act to build our capacity for God; the Spirit is given as the continuing gift of that infinite life in ours, expanding us that we too may flow over with fullness of joy. This journey into abundant life and deeper truth is never finished. The gift of new life, says Rowan Williams, 'is not simply infused in an all-conquering fullness in a single moment. It does not become a new law, a new fixed pattern or possession ... It is, simply, new life. That is to say, a new world of possibilities, a new future that is to be constructed day by day'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), pp.18-19.

Trinity Sunday is the culmination of the season of Easter. From next week, we enter into the season of the church's year called by tradition 'Ordinary Time' – but as I hope we've been reminded over these weeks, there's nothing ordinary about living in God's time and responsive to God's truth. Indeed, it's a way of being alive that's receptive to and generative of abundance, and to this let us commit ourselves ever and anew.