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Discovering the Trinity (Romans 8. 12-17)

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One of my favourite bits of theological wisdom comes from the pen of James Alison. He says: ‘monotheism is a terrible idea, but a wonderful discovery’. Why is that? Well, in a nutshell, it’s because our *ideas* of ‘God’ almost inevitably say more about us than they do about God. They tend to make ‘God’ a player in our schemes of power and meaning, a function of our identity and need, deployed to shore up our fantasies and self-interest. The authentic *discovery* of God, however, has a different energy. Rather than an idea we possess, God is a relationship we undergo. And rather than confirming our unreconstructed identity and interests, this discovery is much more likely to unsettle and reconfigure us, to draw us into something unexpected and new. There’s a sense in which the whole history of Israel is about learning to recognise the difference between the images of gods we invent for ourselves and the reality of God we undergo.

Something analogous can be said, I think, in relation to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I imagine I’m not the only person whose first introduction to the Trinity came from ministers (and the occasional nervous curate) wrestling gamely with analogies of shamrocks and the three states of water! That’s the Trinity as idea – an abstract theological proposition which requires explanation and of which the faithful need persuading. But for the early church, Trinitarian language wasn’t abstract or theoretical. It emerged under the pressure of a transformed experience of life-and-prayer in the wake of Jesus. Which suggests that without entering into that experience, its meaning will never fully open up. There’s all the difference in the world

between having a Trinitarian *idea* of God, and discovering Trinitarian life. How this might matter for our lives, is what I'd like to begin to explore.

I've said that Trinitarian language emerged under the pressure of the first Christians' transformed experience. Our reading offers one example of this. Paul is writing a letter of encouragement and instruction to the young church in Rome. In this passage, he speaks of the difference between those who live responsive to the Spirit of God and those who are determined by 'the flesh'. Don't be put off by the apparent puritanism here. For Paul, 'the flesh' is not primarily about 'the body' or 'bodily pleasure'. It refers to the whole complex of wilfulness, self-centredness and self-righteousness that separates humanity from God. The problem with being stuck here is that you never get past yourself, never connect to the larger life – 'if you live according to the flesh, you will die' (8.13).

By contrast, Paul says, if you live in accord with the Spirit of God, which is the same Spirit that was in Christ, then, you will live and live well: 'to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' (8.6). There's something here about the possibility of mortal, human life connecting with and being animated by the Spirit of life itself (8.2); the Spirit who brought life to be (at Creation) and life from death (at the resurrection of Jesus). As we're led by this Spirit, Paul writes, we come to stand in the same relationship to God as Jesus did: 'When we cry, "Abba, Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ'.

We can see in a passage like this that there's already a sense of what the tradition would later call the three 'persons' of the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And a sense that, to be connected to one is to be connected to all, since they are and act as one. This isn't just a theory for Paul

– it’s something that emerges from his own knowing. Once, he had been a self-righteous zealot, living according to the flesh, fulfilling (as he thought) the will of a zealous God by persecuting the early church. But encountering the voice of the risen Jesus, he has come to realise that his ‘idea’ of God was utterly mistaken; that he must undergo God as something utterly Other. The process of that undergoing drew him not only to recognise Jesus as ‘Lord’, but also drew him increasingly inside of the life Jesus lived – radically responsive to the One he called ‘Father’, radically infused by the energy of the Spirit. As Rowan Williams insists: ‘the Trinity is never an object (or a trio of objects!) at a safe distance. Knowing the Trinity is being ... drawn by the Son towards the Father, drawn into the Father’s breathing out of the Spirit so that the Son’s life may be again made real in the world’.¹

Why does this matter? It matters because it invites us into a new way of being human. Rather than living as self-enclosed, self-sufficient selves, to be drawn into the Trinitarian life means constantly giving yourself over to and receiving yourself from God, as Jesus did. And that means that who we are is never closed, never fixed; we’re always being given over and given back, always renewed, always deepening our receptivity and so endlessly growing in love. ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed’, writes St John. ‘What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (1 John 3.2). Williams puts it this way: ‘To be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity; and that humanity is the perfect human ‘translation’ of the relationship of the eternal Son to the eternal Father, a relationship of loving and adoring self-

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.57.

giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other', that ends not in death, but in life, to the self.²

Contemplation is an intrinsic element in our participation in Trinitarian life. This is because, as a practice of self-forgetting attention to the Other and trustful self-yielding, it's what enables us to receive what God longs to give us. Williams writes: 'With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence', contemplation brings us 'at last to the point where we may begin to grow', 'open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts'.³ This isn't about having some private religious experience that'll make us feel secure or holy. It's about becoming as Christ is, able to look at one another and, the whole creation, as Christ does – mercifully, lovingly, self-lessly, justly. Which is where contemplation and action become inseparable.

Discovering the Trinity, then, is not signing up to some abstruse theological doctrine, irrelevant and remote from daily life. It's discovering a radical new possibility for human being made available because of who and how God is. It's finding ourselves on the inside of God's life, so to share it in our world. Thanks be to God, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

² Rowan Williams, Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, October 2012, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html>.

³ Williams, Address on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*.