

12 June 2022

All That the Father Has Is Mine (John 16. 12-15)

© Sarah Bachelard

For churches that follow the liturgical calendar, there's a sense in which the Feast of Trinity marks the fullest recognition of all that we've been learning, contemplating and celebrating since Christmas. How so, you may ask?

With the birth of Jesus, the church proclaims that God – the animating source of all life – is become present and active in a new way within the finite world. During the season of Epiphany, this divine presence and agency is said to be recognised in the child Jesus by a range of characters (those with 'eyes to see') – including the wise men from the East in Matthew's gospel, and in Luke by Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist), and Anna and Simeon who had long awaited the Messiah.

By the season of Lent, Jesus is all grown up and we tell stories of his public ministry; his words and actions among the people, leading ultimately to his total self-giving through rejection, death and resurrection. Then, in the confusing and uncertain aftermath of these events, the season of Easter invites us to contemplate, with the first disciples, what just happened and what it might mean. What's being discovered about the nature of God? What does that imply for our human way of being and for the world as a whole? This season of Easter culminates with Pentecost, which we celebrated last week. Here the church testifies to an experience of the same divine power that animated Jesus now being poured out upon the gathered community, empowering *it* – empowering *us* – to become the 'body of Christ' – that is, to become (as he was) the presence, passion and action of God in the finite world.

Finally – today – at the Feast of Trinity, we celebrate the church's mature understanding of all that's been revealed and enabled by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. We celebrate a new vision of God. We recognise a new understanding of what

it means to be fully human and how that becomes possible for us. So today, I want to say a little about this Trinitarian distillation of divine and human meaning.

‘All that the Father has is mine’ (John 16.15). Again and again, in John’s gospel, Jesus insists there is no gap between what he says and does, and what God says and does. ‘Very truly, I tell you’, he declares, ‘the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing: for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise’ (5.19). And again, ‘The Father and I are one’ (10.30). Jesus explicitly claims a unity, even an identity, between himself and God, between himself and the source of all being. That sounded blasphemous to his contemporaries. But the gospels insist that to recognize him truly is to recognize his union with the divine – to recognize his divinity. As when Thomas exclaims at the end of all his doubting: ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20.28). Equally, it’s to recognize that if we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father (John 14.9). For, as Archbishop Michael Ramsay once put it, ‘God is Christ-like and in him is no un-Christ-likeness at all’. ‘The Father and I are one’.

And yet, again and again, Jesus addresses God as if addressing ‘another’. He relates to his ‘Father’; he is responsive, obedient. ‘If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father’ (John 10.37-38). This suggests there’s differentiation, relationship, responsivity in this union, and not a simple identity.

And it’s this differentiation, this ‘between’, that gives rise to a third. For connecting Jesus and his Father, going between, sustaining union, is love. Over time, the church came to understand this bond of love as itself a form of divine agency – the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is the gift exchanged between Father and Son – not independent of them, yet not reducible to either. And the revelation of the New Testament is that this same ‘go-between’ Spirit may be bestowed on us with the same effect – that is, with the effect of enabling our communion with God, our growth in relationship with reality. So Jesus promises his disciples, ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... He will glorify me [that is, he will

make me known], because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (16.13-14). If you receive him, to paraphrase the opening words of John's gospel, you will have power to become children of God, 'born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (John 1.12-14).

Well, none of this is easy to grasp. And in fact the Trinitarian language for God which began to emerge in the New Testament led to centuries of theological and philosophical questioning. In and through Jesus, something seemed to have happened which could not be contained in the conceptual frameworks previously available – so a new set of concepts, a new way of thinking about God, about being had to be discovered. It's easy to feel impatient with what can seem the obscurity and technicality of all this. God is one substance coexisting in three co-equal, co-eternal, con-substantial divine persons, the Son begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son (or maybe not – if you're in the Orthodox tradition, where the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone), and so forth. But as Rowan Williams has pointed out, if we're going to act towards Jesus in certain ways, then the question inevitably arises as to how we speak *about* him as well as *to* him.¹ The theologian's 'conceptual labours' are not an end in themselves. But they are concerned with integrity; with whether our prayer and practice can be intelligibly connected to our understanding of reality and so can truly deepen our living. In the last part of this reflection, I want to touch on three aspects of the Trinitarian vision of God that seem to me to matter for how we pray and who we may become.

First – God is one. God is self-consistent. Wherever and however God is said to be present and active, then (as the Prayer of Approach in the Anglican tradition puts it) God is 'the same God, whose nature is always to have mercy'. The Trinitarian insistence on the one-ness of God is a ground for trust. And though we speak (rightly) of the mystery and unknowability of God, though we recognize God is beyond our full comprehension, we nevertheless also proclaim there is nothing capricious about God, no contradiction in what God is up to in the world, no double

¹ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.xvi.

binds set up for us to fall into. I've already cited Archbishop Ramsay's words: 'God is Christ-like in whom there is no un-Christ-likeness at all'. And the same can be said of the Spirit. And this helps with discerning what really is of God and what isn't – as when St Paul, teaching the Corinthian community how to discern the Spirit of God from a range of other enthusiasms, reminds them: 'Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12.3). God is one.

Second – God is relational; God is 'being as communion' as Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas puts it. More verb than noun, to proclaim that God is love is not just to describe what God characteristically does, but to recognize the act of loving, giving and receiving, as eternally constitutive of the being of God, eternally constitutive of the ground of all being. God is nothing but 'a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other'.² 'All that the Father has is mine'. The Trinitarian insistence on the relationality of God is an encouragement to openness and receptivity, for it is God's nature to give of God's self.

Third – and relatedly – God is participat-able. In Trinitarian vision, the incarnation of the Son and the sending or giving of the Holy Spirit are expressions of Love's eternal desire to share Love's life and joy. To the extent that we are responsive, receptive to this presence and action of God, we are drawn into radical communion with the love at the heart of being. And the paradox is that this makes us not less, but more fully human; not less, but more fully and freely ourselves. Receiving the gift of the Love that draws us into Christ-likeness, does not make us clones. For, in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (in 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'):

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>.

Christ plays in ten thousand places.
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

God is one substance in three persons drawing all things into communion. I said that the Feast of the Trinity celebrates a new vision of God, and a new understanding of possibilities for human being enabled by the coming of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Nothing forces us to adopt this vision of reality. But as we seek to grow in truth, as we open ourselves to Love in prayerful receptivity, we may find that this Trinitarian vision expresses our experience more and more. We may find this way of conceiving God generates within us a deeper and steadier devotion, a responsive giving of ourselves to the giving love that (in Dante's words) moves the sun and the other stars.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen