

TRINITY SUNDAY HOMILY 2020



I think I say this every year on this feast, but for all the theology I have studied when I think of the Trinity what comes to mind is ‘Nuns on the Run’. That scene where Robbie Coltrane and Eric Idle are hiding out as nuns in the convent and Reverend Mother tells Eric he has to take a girls’ class on the Trinity. Panicking, Eric, who knows nothing about religion, is sitting in a cell, with Robbie, both dressed as nuns, and he asks Robbie, a lapsed Catholic, what the Trinity is. Lighting a cigarette and pushing back his wimple Robbie says: ‘Hmm, the Trinity, well that is a bit of a...tough one.’ Not the actual words he uses.

And so it is.

When Moses meets God at the Burning Bush in Exodus he asks God who he is. First God says: ‘I am the God of your Fathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ That is easy enough. God is the traditional God of the tribe. It is what an ancient society would have expected. But Moses pushes God further, ‘Who should I say you are, what is your name?’

‘I am who am,’ is the unhelpful reply. For centuries people have poured over this phrase and translated it in different ways. The verb ‘to be’ in Hebrew is Haya. In its various forms it is the origin of the word Yahweh, sort of ‘The Being.’ The Jewish Teaching Bible translates the phrase as ‘I will be what I will be.’ Others say it cannot be in the future tense, it must be the present. The way Hebrew verbs work is different to English, so it probably means in some way, ‘I am and continue to be who I am, as what I am is as yet unfinished.’ What is clear is it is about continual ‘being’ and ‘existence.’

But if we move away from the Hebrew to something we know better, besides the Sign of the cross, the most Trinitarian prayer we say is the ‘Glory be...’

So it begins obviously with ‘Glory be’ which is saying, ‘Praise to you,’ or, as we know ‘Glory’ means the presence of God, so it is saying rather more, ‘This is a prayer to you, my God, who I worship, and more widely to the world, this is the God I want to show you, reveal to you.’ So the rest is about who God is.

Let’s jump to the last part first, ‘who was in the beginning, who is now, and who ever shall be.’ This is pretty much what the Hebrew was trying to say, isn’t it. Our God is always here, always with us, always has been. No-one and nothing can end God’s existence, or God’s support for us.

The ‘now and forever’ is again like the Hebrew, just continuously going on without end.

Then if we come back to the first part ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit,’ for centuries people, have been fighting over this. Literally sometimes. How do they fit together? If we believe in one God, what does this mean? We have two Creeds we use in Mass, but the language, set down fourth century of the main one, the Nicene Creed, is full of Greek terminology. (The Apostles’ Creed is said to be a bit earlier.) Both creeds are snapshots of faith at that time, argued over by bishops, priests, monks and the odd highly educated lay-person. They are attempts of their time to define God, and the language like, consubstantial’ or ‘begotten not made,’ fascinating as it is if you enjoy that sort of theology, is not always helpful to the ordinary mortal, especially at 10.30 on a Sunday morning. So we can find ourselves back with Robbie Coltrane and Eric Idle.

When I see people linked together as are Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I think of Mum and Dad, Nana and Granddad, brothers and sisters. It is about close relationship. (If it makes you think of a solicitors’ office, well, it is still about relationship, if not always that

close.) More recently, taken from Orthodox theology the Trinity has been defined as a dance, a continual, energy-filled, love-filled relationship.

If we hold onto this idea of life-filled, energy-filled relationship, and then each think to ourselves what the words ‘existing’ or ‘being’ and ‘relating’ mean, we come up with all sorts of words. Alive, breathing, existing, living. Growing? Not really for God, except when we change that into ‘creating.’ And a large part of being alive is both living with others, relating to others, loving others and communicating. (All these words the Bible uses about God.)

Then, for me, we get closer to an image. Remembering all the time that we are using human language to describe a mystery.

Around the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the following inscription: “In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate. Unto Him belongeth sovereignty and unto Him belongeth praise. He quickeneth and He giveth death; and He has Power over all things. Muḥammad is the servant of God and His Messenger.”

As many a statement in Judaism, it is a reinforcement that there is one God, and we can agree with nearly all of it. (We might have to debate the last line.) But for Islam coming later, it is also a rejection of the Trinity. And the problem arises because we Christians are not just a Religion of the Book as are Judaism and Islam, we are also a religion of a person, Jesus, as well.

At the core of Christianity is our Gospel today: ‘God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.’

And that is it for us. The love of God flowing out of the dance to help us. Jesus, who is also God, yet breaches the divide to be one of us and with us and give his life for us. So close, so intimate, so loving. Jesus, who in himself brings us this knowledge of the God who is the foundational joy and mystery of Christianity. It is the wonder of this that our gospels are trying to share with us.