

“COME, LET US SING TO THE LORD”

Psalm 97:1-7; Psalm 46:1-7; Psalm 8

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“Holy, Holy, Holy! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” That song takes me back to my childhood church, where for some period of time it was the opening hymn in each Sunday’s service. I’m not sure how long that went on, and I don’t remember ever hearing any explanation for it. But it was probably the first hymn to which I learned all the words, and singing it so regularly made an impression on me. It communicated to me that the content of this hymn was really centrally important to the faith of the church.

Important though it may be, lots of Christians, I’ve noticed, kind of shy away from the topic of the Trinity, and plenty of preachers groan at the thought of a Trinity Sunday sermon. But I like a challenge, and I still feel an affinity for this complicated, but rich and interesting piece of Christian doctrine. There’s a lot that can be said about how and why Christians came to express their experience and understanding of God in this language. Today I want to just focus on one particular truth that this doctrine calls me back to, over and over.

First, though, I want to acknowledge that we often find the Trinity to be something of a stumbling block in our thinking and our talking about our faith. It can seem esoteric, nonsensical, too difficult, and maybe unnecessary for practical Christian living in the modern world. We still like to sing the hymns and hear the traditional words but we tend to keep the focus of our faith on aspects of the Christian story that are easier. I think that’s kind of too bad, and it’s partly because we’ve gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, so to speak, when it comes to the Trinity. It seems to me that we have thought of it either as a puzzle or a test... when it’s not meant to be either of those things.

Preachers, I think, are especially inclined to treat the Trinity as a puzzle. Something to be solved, decoded, figured out, explained. How do we untangle the apparent contradiction in the very words? What’s the perfect metaphor we can use to make it make sense? Is there some fresh language that will help? You can go on and on with this, and the arguments and questions will not end. Now, delving into difficult theological questions is not a bad thing... but God is not a puzzle to be solved.

On the other hand, a lot of people have regarded the doctrine of the Trinity as a test of loyalty and true belief: can you accept unquestioningly what you’ve been taught or can you by sheer willpower force yourself to believe something irrational? You can go on and on with this, too: does faith demand the believing of ever-more difficult things? Another problem with approaching the Trinity this way is that it closes off possibilities for genuine understanding and connection. God is not dogma to recite or a test to pass.

If we can let go of those wrong-way-round ideas about the Trinity, maybe we can find the freedom to embrace the deepest truth this doctrine offers us: that God is mystery.

Oh, of course, we know a *lot* about God – from Jesus, from the scriptures, from the creation’s awesomeness, from the testimony of others, from those whose lives reflect divine love, and from our own experiences of God’s presence. God reveals Godself to us in many ways but is also in many other ways *beyond* our ways of knowing, defining, explaining, categorizing and controlling. There is a reason we find so many different metaphors for God in the Bible –refuge, rock, king, warrior, potter, shepherd, light, father, mother, wind. No single image can express even our experience of God, let alone the totality of who God is. God is Other. Transcendent. Mystery.

The doctrine of the Trinity is at its heart an acknowledgement of that mystery, and an attempt to express the experience we have of God: that mystery within us, beside us, and beyond us.

The doctrine of the Trinity is an invitation to *trust* in that mystery, to let ourselves be enfolded by it, to give ourselves to it.

The best comparison I can think of is... music.

There’s quite a lot a person can learn about music – history, music theory, knowledge and appreciation of different genres and forms and styles. It’s possible to develop, with practice, a high degree of musical skill. But the heart and soul of music is beyond anybody’s knowledge and skill. Music is ... a mystery. So much of what we experience in music, when we give ourselves to it, is difficult to explain: How the whole is often more than the sum of the parts. How some melodies bring us to tears and others fill us with joy. How music can comfort, heal, instill courage, bring people together, revive memories, define generations and cultures, express our deepest longings. Music is language beyond words. Music lifts our souls and opens our hearts to God in a way that is unlike anything else. Music is a mystery, and a *way into* mystery.

As I thought about how the mystery of music echoes the mystery of God, I happened to be also reading an article about the transcendent nature of the Creator (not anything about music), and came across this sentence:

“God orchestrates (orchestrates! ☺) a world where God holds what humans cannot.” (Ruthruff)

Is that not the essence of God and our relationship to God? That God holds what we cannot hold, understand, sustain, or love ... all the creation, all our fellow beings, even our very selves? The doctrine of the Trinity expresses that mystery, and is a way into appreciating, connecting with, that mystery.

This poem for Trinity Sunday, by Malcolm Guite (who is a musician as well as a priest and poet) touches on this same idea:

In the Beginning, not in time or space,
But in the quick before both space and time,
In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
In music, in the whole creation story,
In his own image, his imagination,
The Triune Poet makes us for his glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.
He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,
To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us, and within.

It occurs to me that maybe the best way of approaching the doctrine of the Trinity – of really *knowing* it - is not with intellect or dogma, but via a path more suited to embracing its mystery: maybe we should simply take the advice of the Psalmist and “sing to the Lord.” Come, let us sing to the Lord. Amen.

Resources

“Trinity Sunday” by Malcolm Guite, in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*.

“In the Lectionary: June 4, Trinity Sunday” by Ron Ruthruff, in *The Christian Century*, June 2023.