



PREACHERS, BONDAGE AND THE TRINITY

I don't know if you have ever thought about preachers and bondage. It is, perhaps, an exotic theme to muse upon; I will quite understand if it has never taken possession of your thoughts or fantasies.

However, this train of thought occurred to me yesterday evening as I came to prepare words for this Trinity Sunday. I might just as well have been handcuffed for all the inspiration I could muster on the theme of the uncreated, consubstantial and coeternal members of the one undivided Holy Trinity. Preachers, you see, are in potential bondage to a number of things – the theme of the day being an obvious one but also others, such as the expectations of their hearers and the demand that they be holy *and* human, moderately entertaining *and* informative.

Only recently it was Lent, Holy Week and Easter, then the Ascension. Last week it was Pentecost, today it is the Trinity. You will understand why the clergy team are now expressing a collective sigh of relief as we drift into the undifferentiated, bondage-free open seas of the '*Sundays After Trinity*' as the church calendar describes them – all twenty-two of them before we eventually spot landfall and approach Advent in November.

A man who lived alone went to a pet shop thinking he might get himself the company a talking bird. He reckoned it would be just the thing to return home from work to be greeted by a friendly voice. At the pet shop he was introduced to a parrot called Cyril that had a large vocabulary. The man purchased it on the spot. It worked a treat. When he came home each day Cyril would greet him and amiably chat away.

But after a while, the bird would throw in some vulgar turns of phrase. The man warned the bird to stop using such language, but to no avail. Then he told the bird that he risked being punished unless he cleaned up his act. He threatened it with a spell in the freezer so that the bird would think about his misdemeanour and learn his lesson (be sure not to try this at home).

The bird's conversation did not improve and so the man popped him in the freezer for fifteen minutes. The parrot emerged, shivering and truly contrite. The man asked the bird if he had learned his lesson. "Yes," said Cyril, "I sure have. But I have one question. On the shelf behind me was another bird—a turkey I think - frozen solid. What had *he said* to get *that* treatment?"

I thought that what we might do this morning is to look for a side door into the Trinity. I am making the assumption that no one here is keen to explore the doctrine *as* doctrine. If you are, here is the twenty second tour: The word 'Trinity' comes from 'Trinitas', a Latin abstract noun that means 'three-ness', or 'three are one'. The first recorded use of the word in Christian theology was in circa 180AD by Theophilus of Antioch who used it of "God, his Word, and his Wisdom". In about 200AD Tertullian used it of the 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. The term does not appear in either the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures.

It seeks to point to the triune nature of God as understood (and we should say, also *experienced*) by Christians: that of God the Creator; Jesus, the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit (the gift of whom we marked last Sunday at Pentecost). The Church has always asserted that the Trinity is a mystery we cannot possibly fathom – memorably

attested to by the preacher who mounted the pulpit and said 'today is the Feast of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity. It is a mystery. No human words can explain it. Amen' and got on with the rest of the service.

Back, for a moment, to the parrot who was punished for unsavoury language and who, mistaken as he was, took the frozen turkey alongside him in the deep freeze to be an even more serious offender whose punishment was that more extreme.

I am nearly always surprised when I come across people who, in their adversity and suffering, seem to think they are being punished, and punished by God. On my selection conference for ordination I was asked in an interview with a bishop what I thought the most distinctive feature of my future work as a priest might be. Being well acquainted with guilt and its corrosive impact on the soul I immediately said 'to let people know that they are forgiven, Bishop'. I would still give the same answer but (with the risk of being thought soft) would add '*and that they are loved*'. Not loved by me in particular, or by you, but by God. Yet 'God', too, is a mystery and can never (in this life) be explained in any satisfactory way; and to be any kind of thoughtful Christian person is to grow accustomed to a kind of elementary sonar which may give us the occasional outline of these things but is pretty vague on concrete detail. I don't think that is a problem. These occasional soundings slowly map out the broad terrain and some of the most prominent features of God's landscape.

Many people do suffer and many Christians have been infected (that is the right word, I think) with teaching that takes us back to the parrot and the freezer; that is, that God is mean and ready to punish and to punish rather harshly and, if need be, to punish progressively and repeatedly. People are free to believe in that kind of God if they wish, and we are free (actually, maybe duty bound) to try and show them the face of the loving God. And of course, people who do

insist on viewing suffering in this way become (consciously or unconsciously) the architects of their own distress – a situation which must distress God even more.

Our psalm today (Psalm 8) has these breathtaking lines, addressed to God: *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what are mortals, that you should be mindful of them? Mere human beings, that you should seek them out? You have made them little lower than the angels; you adorn them with glory and honour*'.

To respond to God's call and to enter into God's business and work is to minister to one another and build up the common good. That is not always easy, overtaken as often we are by our own demons, fears and addictive patterns of acting and reacting. But just as the sonar analogy referred to the slow building up of a recognisable topography, so (we believe) does the faithful pursuit of God make possible a slow building up of God's nature in our own hearts. There will come moments when we hear ourselves sharing those words of wonder the Psalmist has so marvellously put together; moments when we slip effortlessly out of the gravitational pull of the ego; moments when we find ourselves loving others and the world because they *are others and the world* and not merely because they reflect, serve or reference ourselves.

As heard by a home-grown English mystic who asked God what God's meaning might be, the answer given was *love is my meaning*.ⁱ This, of course, tells us everything and tells us nothing. 'Everything' because what more is there to be said or explained or desired?; 'nothing' because this is no grand concluding statement but the most irresistible, promise-laden and fantastic *invitation* to work-up and work-out its meaning in the particular circumstances of our life and times. It is no trivialisation of our Creator to meditate upon God reaching out in joy, taking us by the hand and saying 'come on, let's go exploring!'

This 'loving' which is the 'meaning' requires *you*. It will be (can only be) expressed through the particularity of you and the unique circumstances of your life. You are the one who has to develop it. People often speak of the 'baggage' of their lives, conjuring up images of heavy items that weigh them down. Yet, it seems, what God is proposing is that the baggage becomes transformed into balloons, things that lift, things that assist the great exploration, if no longer despised. 'Love is my meaning': not conformity, not timidity, not 'success'.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity attempts to say something about God's *essential nature* and its *three expressions* in the act of creation, the reaching out in Jesus and in the active presence in our hearts and our world of God's irrepressible energy, the Holy Spirit.

Make of it what you will - but don't make of it less than it deserves. It seeks to point not to a solitary grumpy God but to love-between-persons in which we are invited to share: here, now and with each other. Amen.

Hugh Valentine

ⁱ Julian of Norwich, contemplative, 15thC