

Roses in December

The playwright JM Barrie wrote that *God gave us memory so that we might have roses in December.*

I heard it this week at a memorial service we held here for a man who never attended on a Sunday but who loved this church, attending through the week many times over the 40 years he worked in the art trade in a gallery in our parish.

God gave us memory so that we might have roses in December.

This seemed to me such a beautiful thought that it stayed with me as I read the gospel for today and thought about what I could say that might be helpful to us – on Trinity Sunday.

It's the Sunday when we are asked to consider what the Trinity is, and how it finds its place in our faith. It's a way of talking about the nature of God that is found in the gospels – because Jesus talks to God, very often saying Father, and also promises the Holy Spirit – so although we are most definitely saying there is one God, there are three ways to receive God's presence: as the Creator of the world, as the provocative human being Jesus of Nazareth, and as we celebrated last week, as the unseen ungovernable spirit who, as we heard in the gospel today, blows where it wills.

Any one of these ideas is complicated enough – but there are three deeply reflective and provoking ways to experience the spiritual reality we call God – and so the Trinity, or to

give it its proper name, the doctrine of the Trinity, is shaped.

The idea of the Trinity was codified into a doctrine or teaching in the 4th century in Nicea, modern day Turkey. And before I go on, I want to say something about doctrine. Because doctrine has in our day in a way unheard of in the 4th century, negative connotations. Faith in institutional leadership, faith in so-called “experts” has, for often very good reason, declined in recent years – and in theological terms, the old doctrines, constructed by all male Western powerful leadership groups and councils, have been brilliantly and creatively challenged by feminists and womanists, by theologians of colour, by theologians writing from an LGBT perspective, the legitimacy of a set of doctrines – “received wisdom” from church leaders – has been seriously challenged. This has been incredibly liberating for many groups of people. If it weren't for those challenges, I wouldn't be able to be a priest for example.

It's an obvious thing to say too but there are plenty of other areas of life where doctrines are formed, repeated, developed, challenged, re-formed.

In HR, the doctrine of right person, right role right time, sets up long processes of recruitment and search that many of us will deal with day to day in our own workplaces.

In the law, the doctrine of “reasonable accommodation” finds its way into all kinds of disputes where one set of rights is

balanced against another – not least in the expression of religious belief.

The Truman doctrine of 1940s America formed the basis for US foreign policy, defending, as they put it, people resisting subjugation. This doctrine was the basis for the Cold War.

What I'm saying in these examples is that we speak about the doctrine of the Trinity within a societal context that says it doesn't like doctrine; that is understandably suspicious of over-arching ideologies like communism or free-market economics, that start to smell of totalitarian attempts to find the definition of everything that will last everywhere for all time. Perhaps in this way, we are inheritors both of the Enlightenment, when we want to make sure we have our own individual acumen attuned to doctrinaire pronouncements, and also children of a 20th century that saw huge political and economic battles between doctrines cause much suffering and distress.

So the word doctrine, its usage, our own attitude towards it, are not neutral – and I'm suggesting it's largely negative.

But rather than just joining in all that, dismantling doctrine and leaving it triumphantly in pieces on the floor, which seems to me to be a bit easy and a bit of a cop out, I suppose I want to try to go further, deeper, to see what might be there. And that's because I think our tendency to create, rely on and then challenge doctrines is part of the human condition. Brand new doctrines are formed all the time; two contemporary ones might be summarised as "be yourself" or "give it your all".

The painter Vincent Van Gogh wrote a letter in which he commented:

"I want to paint man and woman with that something of the eternal which the halo used

to symbolise, but which we now seek to confer through the actual radiance of our colour vibrations" The letters of Van Gogh p 151 ed Mark Roskill 1972.

Just as, for the most part, contemporary artists have left halos behind as a way of expressing the divine presence in humanity, I want to suggest that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is the theological equivalent of a halo. A pre-modern expression of belief in what God is like. But now we might keep the deepest truth of it, but not rely on the old ways of setting it out.

Just as some people might ask why we still paint landscapes when we now have photography, Christian faith wants to ask questions not just about what we see, but about the quality of seeing, and explore the mysterious assertion that we ourselves are seen by the unseen God.

Because the question that the Trinity is addressing is thoroughly contemporary. It's asked all the time. Is there more than this? Is this life, what we have now – is this it? Is there God? What's God like? This question has had an answer in Christian history that was in its time new and fresh, imaginative and quite amazing. The nature of God, said the 4th century Council of Nicea is not a remote sitting on a throne king, ruling in a despotic way unaccountable and alone. The nature of God is dynamic; there are three what they came to call "persons" of the Trinity – Holy Spirit, the one who inspires and moves now - Christ – who was a particular person at a particular time but who expressed the nature of God in a new way, and Creator or Father if we're relating God to Jesus.

Of course once the philosophers got hold of this elusive and beautiful idea, the language became very technical. We ended up with words like "consubstantial, coeternal" and so

on which make the Trinity sound like a complex rubics cube. The language of doctrine was professionalised. And we easily became remote from this most intimate and creative of God-language.

It's a bit like the medicalization of my language about my own body. I know my body; but I know too that my kneecap that I love as my kneecap - is also called by the professionals, my patella, and my shin bone, which I know as my shin bone, is also called a tibia. The familiar more intimate names I have for my own body are given names by a professional medical establishment - much like my own spirit-knowledge of the mystery I know and trust as God is given technical language that can make me feel that God is not my own any more.

So the exercise of my imagination is the key to this; there have been thousands of ways in which people have tried to explain what the trinity means; difference in unity, relationship in aloneness; clover leaves with three parts, candles with three wicks; and Augustine that most profound of thinkers and most humane of Christians - he came up with steam, ice and water - all different ways of expressing the same element.

It's hard to imagine something that is so undefinable - and ultimately it's really important that we know all the words we find are totally inadequate, that language is completely useless, although we can't stop ourselves trying. But I heard a professional astronomer once - talking about the birth and death of stars in space and the creation of black holes, describing what he thought was the energy that bound and shaped the universe. As he showed amazing pictures from the Hubble telescope, he started to talk about the scientific fact that the universe itself is expanding - and that the rate of expansion is increasing. The universe is growing now - and the rate of growth is

accelerating. As his studies led him to see the movement and energy, the life and death of stars, the spectacular super nova images from light years away - his description of the fundamental energy he observed was dynamic love.

"Dynamic love" is a brilliant way of describing what the Trinity is trying to get at. Is there God, if so what's God like? In contemplating this question, the Trinitarian answer imagines the energy that is God - the energy that underpins the universe, that breathes life into the mystery of humanity and which holds and sustains all that is; imagines this dynamic life in another technical word that modern theologians use to try to talk about it - and that's pericoreisis. Which simply means an eternal dance. God is the three persons of the Trinity - God is a noun - but also God is a verb - God is the movement between the persons; God is Godself- interrelational, flowing, dancing.

God isn't then three bits on top of one another - Father at the top, Son a bit further down and Spirit swirling about somewhere underneath; and bearing in mind the image of the Spirit often as a dove - God is not either as feminist theologians sometimes rather disparagingly describe it - two blokes and a bird - God - Trinity - is a dynamic, creative, mutually dependent, wholly beautiful flowing love.

So what we might say. So what? What does that have to do with my actual daily life as I'm living it, with all its compromises and worries, paying rent, dealing with our debts or our broken relationships or our boring job or our anxiety about the state of the world? And how does it relate to our common life - where this week we said goodbye to our Night Shelter guests after 6 months, knowing that at least some of them don't have accommodation to go to. Where a group of

us from this church will be in Berlin this time next week, preparing to travel to Auschwitz.

Well first of all, the implication of this Trinity is that before we start arguing over what God is up to, God contemplates us, and invites us to live differently. It's not up to us to have an anxiety-laden debate and decide what God is like, although that never stops us trying. Because ultimately, it's God that gazes at us before we gaze on God, we become the one who is gazed upon, appreciated, loved: and in this contemplative space, it is possible to hear an irresistible invitation to live – to join in the dance, to let go of our own tightly held rigid point scoring exchanges with which we fill our week, to release ourselves from our focus on what I can get out of you and how I can get on, independently from you; and allow ourselves to fall into this dynamic loving interdependent way of living that is at the heart of all Creation. And as we fall, just as a grain of wheat falls, we hear the words of the mystic Teresa of Avila who assured us that we cannot fall out of the everlasting arms of God – we can only fall into them.

For us to live a Trinity-shaped life, we are invited into an attentive life that is rooted in contemplative and peaceful trust, that is not static or brittle; but is a life energised and irrigated by dynamic love. It's not a safe way to live. It's always on the move. Doctrine does not have to be doctrinaire.

And so back to JM Barrie with whom I started. *God gave us memory so we could have roses in December.* For me, doctrine, (teaching), is our collective memory of the rose, that we saw blossom in the past, but still can enjoy today. The doctrine of the Trinity is then far from being locked up in the 4th century when it was first written down. Even though its words and pre modern pictures - like a too-neat halo - might not speak directly to me anymore- *I can still smell it.*

And just like the memory of the scent of the rose will sometimes bring me grief, remembering the blood shed in the name of defending that doctrine is a cause for repentance and collective shame.

If doctrine is the church's collective memory, like the memory that enables me to have roses in December, then when I have inhaled as deeply as I dare, I am able to bow before the majesty of it all, then stand up and begin again, strengthened to work for justice by the beauty I have witnessed; the endlessly creative Trinity; or *the rose that blooms without a why or a wherefore.*

Amen.

Lucy Winkett