

Trinity Sunday

Gn 1.1-2.4a; 2 Cor 13.11-14; Mt 28.16-20

18 May 2008

Church of the Holy Communion

PSA+

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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... Yes, obviously, I want to say; we're all here, after all – but why? Why, "in the beginning," did God create the heavens and the earth? That of course is philosophy's great question – *Why is there something rather than nothing?* Bede Rundel, emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University says it is a question that "has a capacity to set the head spinning which few other philosophical problems can rival."^[i] It is the "primordial existential question,"^[ii] and it's a question that doesn't go away once we confess that God made the world. I'm about to answer it, which, I guess is nice (actually I hope to give the Church's answer). But first, a related question: There's a story told about a question asked of the German reformer Martin Luther – it's likely apocryphal, but it sure sounds like Luther. According to the story, Luther was conversing around with his students over a meal, as he often did, when one of them asked a question: *What was God doing before he created the world?* To which Luther is said to have replied, "God sits under a tree and cuts branches and rods, to beat up people who ask useless questions to which he has not provided the answers!"^[iii] Well, that's a cutting reply to an earnest question – and, contra Dr. Luther, I think a good question, an important question – a question right up there with *why is there something rather than nothing?* Both are questions that are resolved in the mystery of God's Being that we come to on this day, Trinity Sunday.

Generally speaking, the great feasts of the Church's calendar are memorials of God's mighty works, his saving deeds in history. They are about the Gospel, the *good news* of what God has done in Jesus Christ to redeem his people – Incarnation, Nativity, Baptism, Fasting & Temptation, "his blessed Passion & precious Death, mighty Resurrection and glorious Ascension," and the coming of the Holy Ghost.^[iv] But on Trinity Sunday our attention is called not to God's acts but to the nature of his Being – that God is one God, yet eternally subsists in three Persons; not three gods, not one god who is sometimes like this, sometimes like that, and sometimes like the other - but one God in Trinity of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The Gospel is about what God has done in history, but the dogma of the Holy Trinity is about who God is in eternity.

But as soon as I put the matter that way, it should be obvious that the distinction between Gospel and Trinity is not so neat, because *who a person is* and *what a person does* are, we know, not entirely separable. Actions reveal character; or, actions are the fruit of character. Now, to be sure, for fallen human beings there is a disconnect here; there is fissure down deep in our hearts – that is a large part of what it means to be fallen. But as I really am trying to preach only one overly long sermon this morning, for now on that matter I'll simply refer you to St. Paul in the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Romans, where he says, *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*^[v] But in the perfection of God, *what he does* is the function – perfectly so – of *who he is*. God never acts "out of character." Therefore, Trinity & Gospel go together; in fact the Trinity gives us the Gospel. So the more deeply we understand God as Trinity, the more deeply we will understand the Gospel, and the more deeply it will shape out lives and redeem our days.

So, how does the Trinity give us the Gospel? And how does the Trinity account for the creation of the heavens and the earth? Well, God's revelation of himself as an eternal, mutually subsisting community of Three Persons – as Trinity – tells us something important about God's character; namely, that "God is love."^[vi] The reason we can

affirm this glorious truth about God – that he is love – is because God is a Trinity. Or we could say it the other way around: God is a Trinity *because* God is love – love in its completeness, love in its fullness.

After all, how many does love take? Well, we know the answer to that; Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston taught us:

*One can take a walk in the moonlight, thinkin' that it's really nice,
But two walking hand in hand is like addin' just a pinch of spice –
It takes two, baby; it takes two!*^[vii]

Well, in fact, and with all due respect to Mr. Gaye and Ms. Weston, love takes three: lover, beloved, and the relationship of love between them. St. Augustine pointed this out long ago.^[viii] And if it sounds odd to say that love takes three, that perfect love takes the Trinity, if we think about it, it begins to make some sense and even to confirm our usually unconscious and unexamined intuitions.

Here's what I mean. As a parish priest, couples have from time to time come to me for counseling (imagine how desperate they must have been!). And they – and all of us – will speak this way. They'll talk about "me, my spouse, and our marriage." Someone will say, "I'm like this, my spouse is like this, and our relationship is like this." Once, even, a woman said to me, "I love my husband, but I hate our marriage!" We speak as if the marriage, the relationship, had a personality and life and motive force of its own. And of course it does! We speak this way all the time – as if the dynamic union of lover and beloved produces a third entity – we might even say (well, some of us might say), it results in the procession of a third hypostasis.^[ix]

So if on the human level, love, in its completeness, takes three – lover, beloved, and the relationship of love between them – that is simply the analogue, the dim reflection of the eternal life of love within God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

And that, by the way, takes us a long way toward answering that "useless" question of Martin Luther's student. What was God doing before he created the world? Well, God was busy – busy being the Trinity. Which is to say, God was busy, as he is still, always, and ever busy, loving. From eternity, God is about the business of love, the love which is the very nature and essence his Trinitarian life. God is, in himself, a complete - a completely fulfilled - community of love. And that tells us why, whether or not we find ourselves in the married estate, all of us were made for relationship, we find our identity only within a community – because we are made in the image of God the blessed Trinity. Therefore, "it is not good for the man to be alone."

John Paul the Great put it this way: *God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of family, which is love.*^[x]

To confess our faith in God as Trinity is to confess our faith that God is love. To pray in the name of the Trinity is to place our confidence in the God who is love. To follow Christ's great commission, to "baptize them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" is to graft the Church and her members into the life of God's love. Because God is love, because God is the Holy Trinity.

And that takes us to philosophy's great question, to the primordial existential head scratcher: why is there something rather than nothing? Given that "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," we may - we should - still ask, why?

Well, we've already answered the question. God's actions are perfectly in accord with his character – and because God is a Trinity, his character is love. God does not create out of any lack within his life; he does not create to

supply some personal need; God is under no necessity to create. No, God is perfectly and eternally fulfilled with his own Triune life. Instead, the creation and redemption of the world is the fruit of God's overflowing love; the love within the Trinity explodes and overflows - and here we are.

C.S. Lewis makes this point in graphic manner. He says,

God is love... God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them. He creates the universe already foreseeing the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross... If I may dare a biological image, God is a "host" who deliberately creates his own parasites; causes us to be so that we may exploit and "take advantage" of Him. Herein is love. This is the diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves.[xi]

There is something rather than nothing because God loves. Do you see what this means? God the Holy Trinity, who is complete in himself and lacking nothing, creates the universe, the heavens and the earth, out of love and nothing but. And to redeem that world from its own rebellion, in Christ God empties himself, enters into the world he made and dies.

God the Holy Trinity creates and redeems the world and you and me even though we are, as Lewis so bluntly puts it, "wholly superfluous creatures." But do you see what that does? Because God has created and redeemed the world and you and me in love - no one is superfluous; everyone counts. *God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was - it is! - very good.* And the cross of Jesus Christ is the price tag attached to the heavens and the earth and everyone you will ever meet. Everyone is of infinite value - and not because of what "use" any one of us might be to anyone else - or to society, or to the state, or even - dare I say it? - to the market. Human dignity and value cannot be found in earning potential, physical capacity, intellectual capacity, the ability to pay taxes on the one hand or to tithe on the other - or in any calculation of utility. When we look at another human being, we must never see a tool, an object to be used, but always a person to be welcomed and loved, a person whom God made and welcomes and loves, recognizing that love will often - just about always, actually - be costly. Sometimes very costly.

After all, look, and in this holy Sacrament receive, what it cost our Lord. And let us be transformed by that love, until we are built into the loving community in which the image of God the Holy Trinity is clearly seen and experienced, in which our lives and our life together is marked by *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*

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[i] Bede Rundle, *Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing?* Oxford, 2004; but for a better introduction to this and other of philosophy's big questions, see Leszek Kolakowski's collection of the same title, *Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing: 23 Questions from Great Philosophers.* Basic Books, 2007.

[ii] According to philosopher of science Adolf Gruenwald: <http://cosmicvariance.com/2007/08/30/why-is-there-something-rather-than-nothing/>

iii Sociologist Peter Berger relates this story in *Questions of Faith.*

[iv] Cf The Great Litany (ASB 154; BCP 149):

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and submission to the Law; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation; By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, *Good Lord Deliver us.*

[v] Rom 7.19

[vi] 1 Jn 4.7,8

[vii] Marvin Gaye & Kim Weston, "It takes Two." *Take Two*, 1965.

[viii] "...let us direct our attention to those three things which we fancy we have found. We are not yet speaking of heavenly things, nor yet of God the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, but of that inadequate image, which yet is an image, that is, man; for our feeble mind perhaps can gaze upon this more familiarly and more easily. Well then, when I, who make this inquiry, love anything, there are three things concerned—myself, and that which I love, and love itself. For I do not love love, except I love a lover; for there is no love where nothing is loved. Therefore there are three things—he who loves, and that which is loved, and love." St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* IX.1.ii

[ix] The standard designation in Eastern theology for a 'person' of the blessed Trinity; "being, substantial reality." I realize Eastern Christians object to the implication here of a "double procession."

[x] Quoted in Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity*.

[xi] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.