Homily – Trinity Sunday 2016 (Yr. C)

*Prov. 8: 22-31, Rom. 5: 1-5 & Jn. 16: 12-15*

Many years ago, back when the dreaded Oxford entrance exams still existed, my middle brother was faced with the following question on the “General Paper”: *‘Can an omnipotent God make 2 + 2 = 5?’* Ever the wit, my brother’s answer was: *‘The omnipotent God has already made 1 + 1 + 1 = 1. What’s the problem?’* Nobody likes a smart-arse, though I hope his bravado brought a smile to the face of the don who marked his paper. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he – like me – didn’t get a place. Of course, I am sure you understand that his answer, witty though it was, was the wrong answer to a completely different question, but perhaps it highlights something important about today’s Feast of the Holy Trinity, and that is, it’s seeming theological complexity. For five years after priestly ordination I was Sacristan at Ampleforth, which meant – amongst other things – organising the rota for Sunday Mass celebrants, and this Feast was by far the most difficult to cover. Year by year I would get refusal after refusal, and so, for three years out of five, I had to do it myself. People seemed genuinely afraid of having to struggle with the “1 + 1 + 1 = 1”, of having to struggle with the language of “persons” and “unity” and “trinity” and “consubstantiality” – and perhaps that’s not surprising. Even the great Augustine, whose *De Trinitate* covers 15 books, felt he might as well be writing in the sand as the tide came in.

Yet that struggle *is* important for us. The most distinctive tenet of the Christian faith when compared with all other religions, and the most primitive, is precisely that intuition of the first Christians that God *is* both One and Three – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and that, despite the “oddness” of such recognition, that this did not compromise or transgress traditional Jewish monotheism; that it was not blasphemy, but the most glorious new revelation imaginable. From the earliest epistles of Paul we hear again and again of this mystery, and – in many ways – the task of theologians from Paul’s day until today has been to explore that divine self-revelation of God’s triune nature – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet still we struggle.

Perhaps a rather weak analogy might help us explore this further, and here I need to beg your forbearance. Little more than a hundred years ago, the atom was believed to be the fundamental constituent of matter – the Greek word  means just that – uncuttable, indivisible. But in the early 20th century, physicists demonstrated that in fact there was a “trinity” of particles in each one – protons, neutrons and electrons – the different numbers of each determining the characteristics of each element. I’m sure you all remember the classic school model – a central nucleus being “orbited” by electrons like planets round the sun. An atom might behave as a single unit in its relations with other atoms, but it was in fact a complex structured entity in itself. Research since then has demonstrated that even this description is too simple. Protons and neutrons (along with other baryons) are themselves made up of different combinations of three families of quarks (up/down, charm/strange, top/bottom), whilst electrons belong to another family of three so-called “leptons” () partnered by yet another family of three, this time chargeless, leptons – the neutrinos (). As if all that was not bad enough, even our idea of “an electron” is tricky, since it can sometimes behave like a particle (as in the solar system model already mentioned) and sometimes like a wave (producing interference patterns when fired through double slits). In short, and before we even mention quantum dynamics, our tangible reality – the benches you’re sitting on, the flowers in that vase, the lectern I’m holding, even the very molecules of our bodies – is deeply mysterious, deeply paradoxical. It is more empty space than “stuff”, its particles are constantly interacting through unseen forces, and even those “particles” themselves are seemingly just “congealed energy” rather than solid “matter” as we might conceive it (see special relativity – e = mc2).

Now in no way am I suggesting that theoretical physics gives us adequate models for understanding the Trinity, nor even that the recurrent families of “three” into which so many fundamental particles can be categorised might do so (tantalising though the correspondence seems!). Rather, I would like to make the possibly more startling claim that actually, it’s the other way round. That is, that since the God we come to know as Creator, as Redeemer, as Sanctifier, as three persons but one God, is a mystery, a paradox beyond our understanding, so the very creation which he upholds and sustains bears that self-same paradoxical nature as its hallmark, in all its complexity, its dynamism, its order and its beauty. God is not apart from his Creation – and it seems to be stamped through with the same paradox which marks his own nature. There is a wonderful phrase which, in many ways, describes both God and modern physics – that he/it is incomprehensible, but not unintelligible. It is a thought worth pondering.

If that were all we celebrate in this great feast, it would be wonder enough – but, of course, it is not. We do not celebrate merely the “what-ness” of the Trinity, but much more importantly, we also celebrate the “who-ness”. The God we worship is not just some supreme Creator deity, aloof and all-powerful. No. He reveals himself as our Father. I was standing in the queue in Sainsbury’s yesterday, and watched a young dad struggling with his toddler daughter. She was being quite naughty, constantly picking up different sweeties at the check-out – but he was all tenderness, all patience, very gently encouraging her to be good. He was just an ordinary guy in a tracksuit, but clearly she was his princess – and it was beautiful to watch his care. That ordinary young man, for those few moments, became for me almost an icon of the Father – and that is the God we worship. In the same way, the Son who is our Redeemer is not just some super-hero, stronger than us, like the pagan demi-gods. No. Our Redeemer is the only-begotten Son who takes on our frail human nature – true God and true Man – so that, dying for us, he might free us from the power of sin, so that, being broken himself, he might make us whole. And the Spirit we worship is not some sort of faceless “world energy”, some “life force”. No he is the Advocate, the Comforter, not only the living breath we share with the risen Christ, but the one who both helps us understand the Father and recognise the Son, and teaches us to pray as we ought, even when we have no words. He is that very love and life which unites Father and Son, and unites us too with them by his indwelling, by his being poured into our hearts. This is our God. This is *who* He is.

Each week on Sunday, we stand and sing the Creed at Mass. At first sight, it can seem to be just a series of intellectual propositions to which we give our individual and communal assent; indeed, we know that this is precisely its origin at the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople. But it can be so much more than that. For that great Creed is the song of our salvation, our song of praise to the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – our song of thanksgiving for all that he has done for us in calling us to know him, love him and serve him. It is the song of the work of the Trinity, and our song of praise in return.

One final little thought. There was one brief passage in our first reading from Proverbs which leapt out at me as I prepared this homily. It was those words about God’s wisdom delighting Him day after day, ever at play in his presence, delighting to be with the sons of men. Perhaps that is the clue to this Feast day. The holy and Blessed Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – delight in their creation, take delight in our existence, take delight in our redemption. The delight they take in us is so strong that they have spared nothing of themselves – the labour of creation, the blood of the Cross, the fire of Pentecost – to share that delight with us. None of that was necessary; all of that is gift. And why? For the pure and simple reason that God longs to share that delight with us, that His joy might be complete in us.

Glory be to the Father...

© Fr Oswald McBride OSB

21.5.16