

*Trinity Sunday 2010*

Bernard of Clairvaux forbade the Cistercian order to preach on the Trinity because it was too difficult, but I will resist the temptation to stop now.

Long before Christ was born, people were reflecting upon life and how we should live our lives so that they have meaning and purpose, not just for ourselves, but for the whole of creation. In Egypt and in Israel and in many of the surrounding nations, the importance of Wisdom was celebrated. In Proverbs Chapter 8, wisdom is personified, and indeed is female, but more critically, is described as being the first created, present before the beginnings of the earth. This is echoed in the first Chapter of the gospel of St John where Christ is identified as the logos, present at creation.

What this means is that experience and ethics have been fundamental to religious teaching for a very long time indeed. Wisdom literature in Judaic history takes the law and interprets it so that the reader can live a good life. It wrestles with difficult questions about the meaning of life.

Yet, although this is integral to religious belief, it is entirely possible to be concerned about wisdom and ethics and be an atheist. I have lost count of the number of people who tell me that they do not go to church or believe in God but feel that they live good Christian lives. And indeed they do not cheat or steal, they are kind and caring, and in some ways it is wonderful that the term "Christian" has become for them synonymous with such virtues. But surely, to be a Christian demands more than this?

The early Christians had first or second hand experience of Jesus, of his teaching and healing, his constant tough demands that people should be forgiving, generous, and above all loving, both of God and neighbour, even if that neighbour was an enemy. Those same people had either witnessed or heard about his humiliating treatment and death. More extraordinarily, they had either seen or heard reports of his resurrection, the strange appearances after his death where he was gradually recognised. And finally, his closest followers had received power at Pentecost, power to teach and preach despite danger, power to heal, and the zeal to start a community of believers. So much experience in such a short time required interpretation. What did it mean?

For the next few hundred years, theologians prayed, studied and argued about it. The arguments were heated in the extreme – there is no intolerance like religious intolerance!

Some thought Christ was just a man – a good man certainly, but only human, perhaps at a push, so perfect that he was adopted by God – but still only a man. Others thought that Christ was divine, not human at all – he was God in human form come down to earth. Both these ideas were rejected, and Christ was described as fully human and fully divine. Yet this did not answer all the questions. What about God, what about what happened at Pentecost? So the doctrine of the Trinity developed and enshrined in the creed. It was there all along in scripture – John's gospel in particular describes that relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But just because something is written down in a creed, does not make it instantly acceptable or understood. When Bernard of Clairvaux forbade the Cistercian order to preach on the Trinity – he did this not because he did not believe in it, but because any attempts to explain it caused at best confusion and at worst heresy, reducing it to describing the way in which one God relates to the world in three ways, or implying that there are three equal but separate parts of God, rather than understanding the essential community that is God.

All “theists” agree that God is the core of reality. John's Jesus goes way beyond this. In this gospel, Jesus does not pray to creation, or to an abstract force, but person to person, as son to his father, in conversation. His Father speaks to him. He listens.

When Jesus says in John's gospel, “all that the Father has is mine,” it implies a relationship so close that everything is shared, where there is complete trust and understanding. But in this passage, he also talks about that time when the Spirit of truth will come. The Father will grant whatever they ask in Jesus' name. This does not mean that if they ask for a new house they will get it, but that because harmony is transitive, the Holy Spirit will teach us how to love what Jesus wants and Jesus loves what the Father wants. So we will never ask for the wrong things.

The Holy Trinity, what we call God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is community, friendship, one divine entity, eternally giving to each person in that entity joy, honour and above all love.

This is true ecstasy, for when love is given out, that is when joy is found. But such is the love that flows within God, that it overflows, into and through the created world, and through the offering of Christ, through the generosity of the Holy Spirit, we too can share in this love, become a part of this family, this community.

So this doctrine that can seem at first to be confusing and contradictory provides us with truth about who we are and how we should live our lives.

The wisdom, that ethics that arises from reflection of our experience, ceases to be an abstract concept. Wisdom, as the proverbs stated, as John's gospel stated, was there at the beginning. Wisdom is part of the community of God. We find wisdom when we enter into that community.

The Holy Trinity demonstrates how we can never act in isolation. Persons are not made in isolation. Even in the Godhead, it is impossible for the Father to exist without the Son, or for Father and Son to live and love without the Holy Spirit.

Loneliness, conflict, anxiety about wars and rumours of wars, despair over the injustice within the world, all these and more become manageable in the hope that is present in the Trinity. For the whole of scripture points to the capacity of humans to become givers and receivers of God's love. Christ, our teacher and friend calls us into deliberate and thoughtful collaboration with the Holy Spirit that dwells within us, and not just in us, but in all people, in our friends and our enemies. That same Holy Spirit draws us into the cross, into the death and resurrection of Christ, the example that enables us to give and not count the cost. And as our wills are bent Christwards, so we are drawn ever more into the Godhead, into that divine conversation that makes all things new. As God is in us, so he invites us to be in him.

"Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?"

She calls us to be in God. That is our purpose.

Amen.