

GOD IS ONE, GOD IS THREE, GOD IS COMMUNITY

Genesis 1: 26-31; Matthew 28: 16-20.

Your individuality, your autonomy, your independence – are these important to you? Individuality, autonomy, independence... many of us would fight to maintain these, and the quality of our lives would be seriously impaired were we to lose any of these. Growing up as children into adults... is it not about developing our own individuality, our own autonomy, our own independence? And is it not hard when we lose any of these due to accident, disability, old age, financial or other hardships that change the circumstances of our lives?

Let me say that even though individuality, autonomy and independence are important values for all of us, the way they are held up as absolutes can lead to detrimental consequences. What do I mean? Well, let's begin with a little western history.

Before the modern world, say before 1500 or so, people didn't think of themselves primarily as individuals. They didn't think of themselves as autonomous or independent. Their first way in was by identifying themselves with a particular race, a clan, a village or community, a family, a religion. Any sense of who a person was as an individual was determined by all these associations and identities first, before they thought of themselves individually. Once the modern world began to unfold, a total reversal took place in how people thought about themselves. Now, we think of ourselves as individuals first. Our goal is autonomy and independence. Our individuality comes first, then we connect to different associations and relationships. Who I am first is Harris, a self-contained individual, and only after do I think about whose child I am, which family or race I belong to, what nation I am a citizen of, what religion and values define my spirituality and principles. But this has not always been the way people have thought.

And I say this because our whole focus on individuality can be as damaging as it can be liberating. For those who have felt repressed and bound by their culture, race, community, family, their circumstances and so forth, a sense of individuality, a hunger for autonomy and independence, is truly liberating. But in a world where we have increasingly to be mindful of each other, our mutual needs, our mutual concerns, and our mutual dependence, asserting our autonomy and independence may be more damaging than liberating. At what point does my push for independence affect someone else by my neglect of them? What about my imposition upon them of my autonomy, my way, my will? At what point do I have to discover who I am as a person by how I relate to others and give to them, put their needs before my own and discover a fullness in being a fellow human being in relationship first?

This questioning is excellent background for appreciating, perhaps, the most complex of doctrines in Christianity – the confession of God as Trinity.

The first thing I'd like to say about the confession of God as Trinity, is that the roots of this thinking are found in the bible. I can't go into all the passages in the bible that are suggestive, if not explicit about God thought of, prayed to and worshipped in plural terms. But our two readings this morning are part of that group. In Genesis, we have the famous account of God's creation of the world. Among the fascinating things about this account is the importance placed on relationships. It's all about relationships - relationships to the earth, all creatures in it, and human beings. It's not about Adam as an individual first, but his need for relationship. Adam's humanity, his individuality cannot be understood and defined in isolation, but only in his multiple relationships – relationships with the earth, with all the animals, plants and trees, and, of course, other human beings. Adam will never understand himself and who he is as Adam, unless he ponders his place in the world and all his relationships and connections in the world.

And this relationality of Adam and all human beings is linked to God as well. God creates because God seeks out relationships. And this is true of God's very nature, God's being, in whose image human beings are made. The word for God in this account is in plural tense, and God confers within God's self in plural terms: "Let US make humankind in OUR image." While this is no solid evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity, it is at the very least quite suggestive of plurality within God and the importance of relationships as definitive of God's identity. Somehow, in God's very being there is no individuality, but plurality. God is never outside relationships.

In our gospel reading, however, there is nothing merely suggestive about the confession of God as Trinity. The confession is explicit and placed in Jesus' own mouth when he commissions his disciples to go out and proclaim the Good News to all people: "baptizing them in the name of Abba God and of the Christ and of the Holy Spirit..." Now even though some scholars suggest this is a later editorial addition into the mouth of Jesus, something he wouldn't have said at the time, the fact that these words are in the gospel tells us that very early on in the life of the Christian community, God was being confessed in plural form. Jesus has a unique connection to God, he represents God, is confessed as God's own beloved child. But he is also very much God in being God's voice, God's very Word made flesh. And he speaks about the Spirit to come, the Holy Spirit, who is not just God's Spirit, but Jesus' own risen Spirit, a source of constant presence, inspiration and transformation within the Christian community and among believers in their own spiritual lives.

The doctrine of the Trinity was never intended as some abstract concept, but rather, as a practical way of helping people to pray and worship, tapping into the richness of God manifested in different ways. A Christian prays to Abba God, father or mother, follows Christ and receives from Christ the pattern of living life as a child of God, receiving from Christ

eternal forgiveness, acceptance and resurrecting hope. A Christian also lives knowing that God is all around, behind, within, above and ahead of her as Spirit, invisible, yet real, powerful and ever-renewing even in the midst of adversity and struggle.

God is very much one – one movement, flow, energy, foundation and presence which the bible calls: Love. But God's working in the world is visible in multiple ways, not just one. God creates, God lives among us and takes on our full life with its joys and sorrows, its wonderful potential and promise, and its failures, tragedies and struggles. And God is always among us, working in us, transforming us, giving us insight, wisdom, hope, courage, patience, faith.... The doctrine of the Trinity so understood doesn't make God more confusing but more enriching a presence. We learn to recognize God in many different ways, the same God, the same love, but infinitely diverse in manifestations, and especially in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit and in the creative and protective Abba God Jesus prays to.

But there's something equally vital and compelling about the confession of God as Trinity that is fundamental for our very self-understanding as human beings made in God's image. And unless we understand this, our purpose in life as a Christian will be imperiled. To explain this I must refer to a conception of God as Trinity that began to develop in the 4th century AD. Many people at the time were confused. If God is creator, father or mother, and if God is the beloved child, son, redeemer, saviour and Lord, and if God is Spirit, transformer and renewer of life in the midst of ordinary life, who then is God in God's own self? Is God in God's self really the Creator/Abba, while the Christ and Spirit are just outside of God? Or is there a way of understanding God so that God's inmost self is also plural?

Please understand that the problem of the Trinity was pastoral. It was about people having clarity about God and how to pray to God, worship God and trust God in their lives. How you understand God is instrumental to how you pray to God and what you expect from God.

So, creative theologians came up with a concept to describe God's inner self, derived from the biblical testimony about the intimate relationship of God - Abba, Christ, and Holy Spirit. They called this relationship: *PERICHORESIS*. *Perichoresis* is a Greek word made up of two words: *Peri*, which means around, and *choros* which means dance, but also separation or distinction. Basically, what these theologians were suggesting about God in God's inner self was that God was in constant relationship, and the image is of the Abba, Christ and Holy Spirit holding hands, each distinctive and unique, separate, yet bound together in such a way that they cannot be separated. They are holding hands in a circle dancing around, bound by love. Their circle is intimate, yet wide enough to include the whole universe and all that is in it. This means that every time we pray to God, every time we struggle to be faithful to what Christ calls us to be and do, and every time we search for the Spirit to lift us up when we are down and guide us forward, we are entering that circle of God, the *perichoresis* of God.

OK, you may be thinking, concepts are just that: concepts. What difference does a doctrine about the Trinity, a doctrine like *perichoresis*, make on the way I live and the way I find purpose and hope in my life today?

Here we come to the final part of the sermon: application. We began by talking about the importance of our individuality, our autonomy, our independence. But then we also talked about how my individuality can become isolating and problematic in that I become competitive with my neighbour rather than in loving relationship with him. And if this is the case, my very humanity is imperiled because I can only really discover who I am as a person by the relationships I have with other people and the world around me. If my relationships are bad, how can I really understand who I am made to be as an individual? I can only flourish if I flourish in relationship with the world around me.

So then, what about modern values like individuality, autonomy and independence? These are important. We don't want to give them up. But the bible's way, inscribed in the doctrine of the Trinity as *perichoresis* offers us a different foundation for our values. It balances the importance of individuality with the importance of community, the importance of autonomy with the importance of mutuality, the importance of independence with the importance of interdependence.

You see, I can only discover who I am as an individual, with all my unique potential, my personality, my character, my gifts – these can only be discovered, they can only develop and flourish when I am cultivating my life in community, in mutuality with others, and with a constant awareness of my interdependence with other people, the earth and all that is in it. Whenever I cut myself off, whenever I put myself above others, or compete with them so that I can only feel good when I win and others lose, whenever I have to define my individuality, my autonomy and my independence over against others, this works against my very created nature. For God, in whose image I have been made, is not like this at all. God in God's plurality of being is dancing around this universe and all that is in it, a veritable circle of life.

Through the creative, redeeming, transforming flow of love, God is welcoming us to discover our humanity again and again, to grow, and to enter by faith this circle of love, joining the dance with God and all that is, entrusting our pain, our fear and our longing to God's re-creative energy, and looking to eternity with both feet on the ground here and now.

May the doctrine of the Trinity not confuse you but inspire you. May you discover how rich and rewarding it is to be living a life where you can only find yourself in relationship, and may you find encouragement to repent and repair broken bridges, forgive and let go, and discover grounds for reconciliation and for relationships that are altogether new. Life is vulnerable and we live in a world of pain, confusion and fragmentation. Unless we find our inspiration to develop relationships and influence others accordingly like ripples in an ocean, where is there

hope? Unless we find our individuality through community, our autonomy through mutuality and our independence through our interdependence, where is there hope?

May the God we worship, The God who is holy Trinity, who is *perichoretic* relationship, dancing around the universe inviting us to join in the dance, may such a God be our inspiration and courage to believe and live.

Amen.