

# The Trinity of Love

*An address given in Emmanuel College, Cambridge on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2003*

By Rev Michael Harper

*Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me... and I will ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, this is the Spirit of Truth..... I ask that they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

John 14:11, 16, 17:21 NRSV

Earlier this year I was invited as a guest to the Enthronement of Dr Rowan Williams as the new Archbishop of Canterbury. The previous week I had had a letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* in which I had responded to an article about the new Archbishop which had referred to his admiration for St Augustine of Hippo, and I had expressed my dissent from some aspects of Augustine's teaching. On my way to Canterbury I was accosted by a stranger who asked me if I was Dr Rowan Williams, as I suppose there are some facial similarities. Arriving in Canterbury and walking through the cloisters of the Cathedral I saw the figure of the Archbishop walking towards me, so, since I had met him before, I went up to him and told him about my encounter with the stranger. "Fine" said the Archbishop, "you can now take my place." Then with a twinkle in his eye he added, "and when you preach I know you won't preach on St Augustine."

Well, here I am in Emmanuel College Chapel, if not preaching on St Augustine, at least choosing his words for the title of my address, "The Trinity of Love", for they are taken from his famous treatise on the Trinity.

The term "Trinity" does not appear anywhere in the New Testament, but there are number of occasions in which the Trinity is made manifest. There is the Annunciation for example, when Mary conceives Christ in her womb. Then there is the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan, celebrated in the East as the Feast of Theophany. Here we recall the voice of the Father, speaking to the Son, and the Holy Spirit coming as a dove on the Son of God. Many also see the Transfiguration as a Trinitarian experience; with again the voice of the Father and the presence of the Holy Spirit, this time symbolised by the cloud on the mountain. But it is

in the verses I have just quoted, and the chapters from which they come that the deepest understanding of the Trinity can be perceived. In his *Readings in St John's Gospe* William Temple describes chapter 17:1-26 as "perhaps the most sacred passage in the four gospels".<sup>1</sup> In these chapters we are drawn into the intimacies of the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This relationship was to take the Church over 300 years to begin to understand, and we shall never be able to comprehend it fully. St Basil the Great once wrote, "let things ineffable be honoured with silence"<sup>2</sup>, and that certainly applies to many aspects of the Trinity. The theologian Vladimir Lossky once described the dogma of the Trinity as "a cross for human ways of thought"<sup>3</sup>. He went on, "no philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity."<sup>4</sup>

However, we need also to resist the temptation of ignoring the Trinity, which is an attitude which is all too common today. In 1989 the Study Commission of the British Council of Churches issued its report on the Trinity with the appropriate title, *The Forgotten Trinity*. One is reminded also of the title of Tom Smail's book *The Forgotten Father*.<sup>5</sup> A contemporary example of this can be found in the famous and successful Anglican *Alpha* course, which a recent survey revealed is known to over 17 million people in this country alone. The course begins with the question "who is Jesus", and only mentions the Trinity much later under the heading "prayer".

The approach to the Trinity has been different in the western and the eastern Churches. *However, it is important that we do not see this difference necessarily as theological error. But rather as a difference in emphasis.* In the western Church, through Augustine and the scholastics, the emphasis shifted from the Persons of the Trinity (*hypostasis*) to the Substance (*ousia*), which, as John Zizioulas points out in his famous book *Being as Communion*, has meant that in the Church's textbooks on dogmatics, the Trinity gets placed after the chapter on the One God.<sup>6</sup> By contrast the Greek Fathers saw it the other way round. They began with the *hypostasis* of the Father, rather than the unique *ousia* of God. By beginning with the Persons, the emphasis has been on the inter-personal relationships of the Trinity as expressions of love. This also has

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important repercussions when we see the Divine Image in our humanity, and the trinitarian aspect of that image in human life.

Our subject this evening is *The Trinity of Love*, words taken from St Augustine's famous Treatise *De Trinitate*.<sup>7</sup> We shall look at this subject under two aspects, **knowing God as love** and **knowing ourselves as love**.

### Knowing God as love

St Augustine develops his thesis by seeing the Father as the Lover (*amans*), the Son as the beloved (*quod amatur*), while the Spirit is the love which passes between the lover and the beloved, uniting them each to the other.<sup>8</sup> But as Bishop Kallistos has pointed out, the weakness of this analogy is that it can so easily lead to the depersonalising of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> This was to become a weakness in both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology from the Reformation onwards. It has also been something which the Eastern Church has largely avoided. But we must not allow such contrasts to be pushed too far. A western writer in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Richard of St Victor, corrects this emphasis, when he describes the affection of the two persons as being "fused into one affection by the flame of love for a third".<sup>10</sup> Here Richard of St Victor is in agreement with many of the Eastern Church Fathers, of which St Basil is a good example. He wrote once, "the unity of God lies in the communion (*koinonia*) of the Godhead".<sup>11</sup>

To describe this mutual love between the Persons of the Trinity, St John of Damascus employs another Greek term, *perichoresis*, for which the Latin equivalent is *circumincessio*.<sup>12</sup> I suppose one could translate this word as "going round in circles", but without the modern connotation of "getting nowhere fast." St John of Damascus writes of "the three Persons and one surge of love". Bishop Kallistos, in this context, describes the interaction of the Persons as "coinhering in one another, each dwelling in the other two through an unceasing movement of mutual love 'the round dance of the Trinity'".<sup>13</sup> Some have said that the difference between the western and the eastern understanding of the Trinity, is that the west sees the relationship in terms of a triangle, whereas the east sees it as a straight

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line. Perhaps it would be better and more true to describe the eastern understanding of the Trinity as a circle.

One of the simplest ways of understanding the circle analogy is to look at the famous icon of the Trinity by the Russian Andrei Rublev, where the figures are sitting in a circle. It is, I suppose, the most famous icon of all, a favourite in the West as well as the East. The figures depicted are those of the angels meeting with Abraham at the oak of Mamre, since in the Orthodox tradition the Father and the Spirit are never depicted as human persons. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly painted as a symbolical representation of the Trinity. The accent is on peaceful communion. Each is facing the other and they seem to be engaged in dialogue. The life of God is seen as mutual love.

But the note of sacrifice is also present, and indeed the central perception of the figures. They sit around a table and the hands of all three point at the chalice. Inside it is the head of an animal, presumably symbolising the ram caught in the thicket, which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son Isaac. The subject of the Trinitarian dialogue is clearly about that sacrifice. Here we see the importance of not separating the Persons of the Trinity, but seeing that they work and function together. In connection with the Cross, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow has described this unity of the personal love of the Trinity as, “the love of the Father crucifying, the love of the Son crucified, the love of the Spirit triumphing by the power of the Cross” Bishop Kallistos writes, “in total solidarity with the world, God the Trinity takes responsibility for all the consequences of the act of creation.”<sup>14</sup> Father Lev Gillet wrote “there was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted in Jerusalem.”<sup>15</sup> As we move to the theme of creation, we note that the acts of creation are also immersed in this Trinity of Love. Some of the Fathers have speculated that this love is so great that God would have become Incarnate even if man had never fallen, and sin had never become a human reality.

### **Knowing myself as love**

Here we move on to that act of creation for which the Trinity accepts responsibility. In Genesis 1:26 we read that God says, “let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness”. We do not know what the original intention of the Hebrew writer was, but from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century onwards Christians have been quick to see in this first person plural a reference to the Trinity.

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Here we need to return to the text in St John's Gospel where the link is clearly established between the love of the Trinity and ourselves. St John describes how the Persons of the Trinity draw us into their life; to return to the Rublev icon, we are invited to join the meal around the table and receive the benefits of God's sacrifice. "As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you," we are told, "*may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me*".<sup>16</sup>

The idea of a trinitarian anthropology is often associated with St Gregory of Nyssa. In a small tract, which was dismissed by most of his contemporaries as wild theological speculation, he attacked the "erroneous custom" by which Man is spoken of in the plural and God in the singular. He taught that in both cases personal plurality is quite consistent with unity of essence.<sup>17</sup> A more modern example of this understanding can be found in the writings of Father Paul Florensky, who was executed in 1937 in a Soviet Gulag. He used to say that the fundamental difference between a Christian view of society and one, like Communism, based on the best intentioned social morality, is that while, according to the latter, people are merely alike, for the former they are in some senses "consubstantial" like the Persons of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup>

Carl Jung once wrote that the Trinity "is a revelation not only of God but at the same time of man"<sup>19</sup>, or in the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "we are Transcripts of the Trinity." To St John's affirmation "God is love", William Blake added, "man is love". We need to rediscover the truth that the nearer we draw to God, the more human we become. On the other hand, if we have been created in the image of the Trinity, and we repudiate the relationship of mutual love between humans, then we become subhuman, what CS Lewis in his book *Perelandra* terms "unman". Or as it has been put more trenchantly by Lossky quoting Florensky, "between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice".<sup>20</sup>

There is a story Dostoevsky tells in his book *The Brothers Karamazov* about an old woman and an onion. The old woman was in hell, but because she had done one good deed an angel let down an onion to rescue her. As she was being pulled up others clung to her to be rescued also. But when she says, "it is my onion not yours", the onion snapped in two

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and she fell back into the lake of fire. In the same book the *starets* Zosima says, “we are responsible for everyone and everything”.<sup>21</sup>

Olivier Clément writes about history, that “it is in the end the destiny of humanity with God, and that our God is the God not of the dead but of the living”.<sup>22</sup> Bishop Kallistos writes that all human societies, the family, the village, the town, the college, the university, the factory, the shop and so on, are intended to be an icon of the Trinity.<sup>23</sup> Just as we can begin to understand God’s nature as we consider the Trinity, so we can begin to understand the mystery of human personhood by contemplating the Trinity. The prayer of Christ in John 17:21 puts it simply and succinctly, “I ask that they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” As we have seen, the Church deliberately distinguished between the distinctiveness of the Persons of the Trinity, the *hupostasis*, and the shared nature of God, their identity or *ousia*. Olivier Clement writes, “by this antinomy they defined the very mystery of love”.<sup>24</sup> He goes on, “so the Trinity signifies that love is not merely the fulfilment of personal existence, but its origin.” So the real distinction is not between body and soul, or body and spirit, but between the nature and the person. Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito, ergo sum*). We should say, “I love, therefore I am”.

Coming back to St John’s Gospel, William Temple comments on this drawing of our humanity into the love of the Trinity, “that fellowship of love is the end for which we were created and for which our nature, as God fashioned it, is designed. By his Incarnation the Lord Jesus not only cancels the consequences of sin and eliminates sin itself, but carries forward the purpose of God in the creation of man to its fulfilment.”<sup>25</sup> When Christ prays that “they may be one as we are one”, we could paraphrase it “that they may become fully human”. And Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century wrote that “the glory of God is a living man, and the life of man is a vision of God”.<sup>26</sup>

Since I started with the story of my encounter with Dr Rowan Williams, let me end with a reference to his recent book *Ponder These Things, Praying with Icons of the Virgin*. Referring to the Rublev icon of the Trinity, he writes, “our eyes are drawn to the central figure of Christ, only

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to be drawn by his posture and gesture towards the left hand figure of the Father. The way to Jesus and with Jesus is the way into his self-forgetting engagement with the human world, not simply a contemplating of him as a Divine Person”.<sup>27</sup> He goes on to compare this with the icon of the Mother of God, and refers to the Treatise of Augustine on the Trinity. “There is an Augustinian implication to be uncovered here, one which the icon makes perfectly plain; for what we see is, of course, a circular motion.”<sup>28</sup>

This “circular motion”, to use the Archbishop’s phrase, is there in the Trinity, and it is there in the drama of human life. The words of Christ in John 14-17 express perfectly that circular motion – within the Godhead, and drawing us all into that Divine fellowship. Here we discover God, and here we discover ourselves. As Olivier Clément puts it, “the person is a mystery intelligible only by the contemplation of the Trinity”.<sup>29</sup>

What better way to end than with the proclamation which comes in the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, “let us love one another that with one mind we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity consubstantial and undivided.”

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<sup>27</sup> R. Williams *Ponder These Things* (Canterbury Press 2002) p 8

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