

MOST HOLY TRINITY - YEAR C

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth"

Trinity Sunday is arguably the most difficult Sunday in the year on which to preach. As Catholics, whenever we address God in our liturgy, and in our prayers, then we do so in the language of the Trinity: making the sign of the cross; in the Rosary; in Baptism; in the great Eucharistic Prayer at the altar – addressed to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But do we really understand what we are saying? And does it really matter? I'd like to be provocative and answer NO to both those questions. Let me explain.

There was once a rather famous Anglo-Catholic priest, named Fr Tooth. He was famous for two things, one of which was a speech impediment. Every time he used a word with a 'th' in it, he would pronounce it with a prominent 'ss'. He was heard to assert one day in his Trinity Sunday homily, that 'his was a holy face; an ancient face; a beautiful face'. Of course, in each case he meant 'faith' – much to the amusement of his congregation. We have sung, 'God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity'. Within this short phrase is something so profound, that we are apt to miss the point: God is not a person, at least not in the sense that we are people.

The origin of this phrase is in Greek plays, still popular throughout southern Europe at the time when Christians were beginning to formulate and codify what they believe about God. The concept of *persona* represents the various parts that people played: you might get six actors playing up to 15 parts. As they took on a part, they would hold up a mask to their face, and each actor might play up to four parts using four successive masks - or *persona*, as they were called. The audience would know, of course, that it was

the same reality behind each *persona*, and yet they are all linked within the same ultimate reality: one and many. In our first reading today we hear about wisdom – an abstract personification of the personal aspect of creation – Jesus, ‘*through whom nothing was made that was made*’. The language is beyond our comprehension: of course we can’t understand what it means for God to be God: One yet Three; begotten and not made; present in the universe, and beyond and prior to it. So does it matter? Well, not really... and yet for St Anselm of Canterbury it is a case of ‘faith seeking understanding’; and for St Augustine, ‘if you can understand it, then it isn’t God’.

We are being drawn into a mystery today, one which is beyond human comprehension. I was very fortunate to do my theological training in the Church of England in Oxford, and sat at the feet of some great scholars, some of whom were clergy. Our course on the Trinity – a whole term – was delivered by a Greek Orthodox bishop, who in nine weeks expounded how Christians throughout the early centuries had attempted to negotiate the great mystery of our faith/face. Upon arriving for our last lecture, the hall was dark, the curtains were drawn, and there was an old-fashioned magic lantern projector on a stand. Bp (now Abp) Kallistos Ware announced the lecture simply and humbly: “I have no more words, no more ideas - images must suffice where words fail”. He talked us through the history of icons/images of the Trinity, cleverly drawing together the strands of nine weeks of academic theology. I was mesmerised: I learnt much that day, and I learnt nothing.

All of our actions in church, our ritual, our ceremonies, point to this indescribable relation between God in the Trinity, and how in that ‘communion’ God has fashioned this world and our lives, so that we should also live in that *communio* – the sharing together of the life of God. That was the great ‘high priestly’ prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper. As Father/Creator,

he has given us life; as the Son/Redeemer, he has restored us to fellowship with God and shown us how to live; as Spirit/Sanctifier, he is poured into our hearts in order to lead us into all truth.

Glory be ...