

*Preached by Canon George Pattison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, on Sunday 30 May (Trinity Sunday) 2010, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ ‘Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.’ ‘We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’.

Whether it is spoken at the start of an act of worship, as the opening salvo of a sermon, as the conclusion of a psalm, or in the declaration of faith called ‘The Creed’, the naming of God as Trinity is one of the defining features of Christianity. As Church Councils and individual theologians have repeatedly insisted, Christian faith is Trinitarian faith and the Christian idea of God is the idea of God as Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what makes it unique, what makes it, specifically, Christian, marking it out from such closely related religious positions as those of Judaism and Islam. But who can explain what it actually means?

Some of you may one rainy Sunday afternoon have seen the 1990 movie *Nuns on the Run*, in which Robbie Coltrane and Eric Idle play two small-time criminals, Charlie and Brian, who steal a million pounds from a gang of Chinese triads and, in the resulting chase, take refuge in what turns out to be a convent, where they disguise themselves as Sister Inviolata of the Immaculate Conception and Sister Euphemia of the Five Wounds. When Brian (alias Sister Euphemia) is asked to step in at the last moment and take a sixth form class for a discussion of the Trinity Charlie (alias Sister Inviolata) has to drill him in the basics of Trinitarian doctrine as he remembers them from his childhood Catholic teaching. This is how he goes about it: ‘You’ve got the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost; the three-in-one, like a shamrock, as our old priest used to say “Three leafs but one leaf”. Now, the Father sent down the Son, who was love, then, when he went away, he sent the Holy Spirit, who came down in the form of a...’ ‘You’ve told me already,’ interrupts Brian, ‘a ghost.’ ‘No, a dove.’ ‘The dove was a ghost?’ ‘No, the Ghost was a dove.’ Pause. Brian: ‘Let me try and summarize this. God is his Son, and his Son is God, but his Son moonlights as a Holy Ghost, a Holy Spirit and a dove and they all send each other, even though they’re all one and the same thing.’ ‘Got it,’ says Charlie. However, you would be right in assuming that Brian’s grasp of the subject is less than sound and when he comes under pressure from the girls’ questions he falls back on the homely analogy of the shamrock. ‘God is like a shamrock,’ he says, ‘small, green and split three ways.’

The confusion is understandable, and any student who has ploughed through the history of the great debates that led to the defining of Trinitarian doctrine in the 4th century might sympathize with Brian’s difficulties. Perhaps it’s almost a relief to learn that the Athanasian Creed, that used to be said or sung in all Church of England Churches on Trinity Sunday, candidly acknowledges ‘The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible’, although it then confusingly adds that ‘there are not three incomprehensibles ... but ... one incomprehensible’. Indeed, some theologians would say that that is precisely one of the central points of the doctrine: that the three-in-one and one-in-three formula is designed to baffle and humble the pride of rational argument and to remind us that reality cannot be reduced to an ensemble of clear and distinct ideas. Reality, supremely divine reality, surpasses human understanding, overflowing all the limits we, in our pride—or maybe our fear—attempt to place on it. Those who come before God must and can only do so in fear and trembling, remembering that it is He that has made us and not we ourselves and that God may be in heaven, but we are on earth and the thoughts, images, and

even the songs through which we express and interpret our lives are of the earth, wrought out of finite, frail, and therefore fallible earthly stuff.

‘If it made any sense it wouldn’t be a religion,’ as Charlie later argues in *Nuns on the Run*. The great Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold, put it more subtly, reminding his readers that ‘the word “God” is ... by no means a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence, a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker’s consciousness, a literary term, in short ...’ that is, something said with an awareness that it is said ‘only approximately’ in order, somehow, to articulate ‘what [we] have present before [our] mind but do not profess that [the] mind does or can grasp adequately ...’ In Arnold’s view the attempt to treat such terms ‘in a fixed and rigid manner, as if they were symbols with as definite and fully grasped a meaning as the names line or angle’ is to use them ‘blunderingly’.

Yet, it seems, that is just how the Church has all too often taken them. Despite the warning given in the Athanasian Creed that the life of the blessed Trinity is ‘incomprehensible’, the Church requires its members to declare the Trinitarian faith to be the only true faith. That Creed itself states that ‘except a man believe [it] faithfully, he cannot be saved’. Christian theologians—and I have read many of their works (in fact, I have even written some of them)—may acknowledge and even insist that the mystery of God surpasses human understanding, but they (we!) typically then go on to explain just what this mystery really means. All too often, one suspects, this is not just blundering, but ecclesiastical power-play, a means by which those who presume to know assert their claim to be the guardians and directors of others’ faith.

Definition engenders division, and whilst sermons proclaiming God’s love and forgiveness and prayers of reconciliation have been spoken in the name of the Trinity, sinners have been cursed, heretics burned, and the swords of murderous dictators blessed in that same name. In making the mystery into a Creed, in insisting on adherence to this Creed as the hallmark of being a Christian, it seems as if the Church has turned what should inspire life, and joy, and love into a means of division and separation. And what is perhaps worse: this is not only a matter of division and separation within the community of the Church, but underwrites and sets in stone the separation and division of Christians from those who conceive and worship God otherwise than in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity developed, I suggest, from generations of devout minds reflecting on the mystery of divine love they had experienced in their lives and seeking words that would best communicate that mystery and that love to others. Theirs were words formed from the crucible of prayer, often in situations of persecution or marginalization, words aimed at strengthening the weak and increasing the spirit of worship, and they are often amongst the most beautifully worked words in our religious heritage. But no one generation’s experiences or words can ever finally bind another’s. In today’s gospel, Christ himself says that he cannot say all there is to say of divine truth to the disciples and that after he has gone there will be further heights and depths of truth to be learned, heights and depths to which only the Spirit and not the written word can guide them. Yet he who said this he was the one who in that same gospel spoke of himself not as a mere prophet of truth but as the truth: I am the way, the life, and the truth, he said. But if he who is truth itself cannot fully or finally or adequately speak all truth, still less can we expect any conclave of ordinarily human spirits to produce a word that will bind all truth for all time.

For many, the Trinity has probably become a mere formula, how you end a psalm. That is probably better than using it as an instrument of heresy-hunting. But if this celebration of Holy Trinity is to nourish and increase in us the joy, the compassion, and the active love that Christ came to communicate, we need to focus less on the words, less on the definition, and more on the reality towards which, as Arnold put it, the words are thrown out. And that, after all, is where the New Testament itself begins, with the promised experience of the spirit, poured, as it were, into our hearts, leading into truth, giving endurance in suffering, increasing hope, and giving the confidence that dares to take the risks of love.

In whatever name or on whatever creed we make our stand or however else we define the meaning of our lives—science or religion, atheism or faith, politics or art—is in the end a secondary matter. First, always and only first, is simply whether we know ourselves to be loved and whether we trust that love enough to go out to meet the world in love. That one word—love—is, in the end, the one word that explains all we mean by Trinity. The reality that word suggests is all that the God who was, and is, and is to come ever gives us, and all that that same God asks, or ever will ask, of us.