

Homily: Trinity Sunday, 16th June, 2019

Proverbs 8: 1

Does not Wisdom call and does not understanding raise her voice?

A very wise theologian and a great man, Professor John Bowker, who used to be Dean of Trinity College Cambridge, once came to spend some time back at his old College, Worcester College in Oxford, at my invitation, when I was Chaplain there. During his stay I am afraid that, despite his age and failing eyesight, I put him to work! He preached for Remembrance Sunday in Chapel, he gave a talk at a dinner I had arranged, and he agreed to talk to a group of students at my weekly discussion group. At the latter event, I remember one phrase that has never left me. He said, 'If you want to know the God story, start with the human story.' He went on to explain a little of what he meant with his own tale – 'a tale of woe' as Mr. Rochester would have it – of an unhappy childhood and a subsequent inability to accept love in adult life. However, the persistent love of one individual, no matter how many times he pushed that love away, eventually transformed his existence as he began to find that he was accepted and loved, just as he was. That person happened to be the wonderful Margaret, an excellent ecclesiastical historian, who has now been John's wife for many years. But in a sense, the encounter, the relationship, the experience of being loved, which transformed one man's spirit, could have been with anybody.

The point, for me, was not only that God's love is 'like' human love but magnified in a way that is beyond our knowing and our comprehension; not only that human love reflects divine love, from which we can extrapolate a vision of God's love from an example and episode of human love that makes us marvel at the generosity, persistence and un-conditionality of God's love; not only that the story has implications for how we might perceive the final judgement of God upon us, if we believe in such a thing, not in terms of wrathful punishment but loving forgiveness. No. What struck me at the time, and has stayed with me all these years is that, in the human story that we inhabit, the story we live every minute of every day, we have the opportunity to find a power greater than ourselves – something that some call spirituality, some call love, some call God – at almost every moment of relationship, encounter and experience. Our human story is one that we might believe was also shared by God, in the form of Christ, limited like us to time and space and the messy complexity of everyday relationships. But either way the story brought me back to the ideas of relationship, encounter and experience as the ways in which, through other people and the world around us, we might glimpse the divine.

To be able to love we must look outside ourselves, only then is our true need to love and be loved fulfilled and life takes on a richness and vulnerability, which was not there before.

Christian theology says that this need has been met and fulfilled within the being of the Godhead. As William Vanstone writes:

“In the dynamic relationship within the being of the Trinity, love is already present, already active, already completed and already triumphant, for the love of the Father meets with the perfect response of the Son. Each, one might say, endlessly enriches the other and this rich and dynamic interrelationship is the being and life of the Spirit. Therefore, nothing beyond the being of God is necessary to the fullness or fulfilment of God.”

God is not like us who must look beyond ourselves to another who, by responding, will satisfy our need to love. Within the mystery of the divine being there is present both the power to love and the triumphant issue of love in the response of the beloved.

If this is so then it has profound repercussions for how we see our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We and every other created being are not necessary to the being or fulfilment of God. God is complete in himself and is not reduced or unfulfilled or even incomplete if we did not exist. In no way can we claim that without us, without our being or without our response, God is in any way unfulfilled. God needs no response from us, or anything in creation to be divinely fulfilled, for he is whole, complete, satisfied within himself the Trinity of love.

If God has no need to look outside himself to have his love made whole and fulfilled then the fact that God loves us is pure gift, which flows from the fullness of his being of love. It is not the kind of love,

which springs from need or emptiness but from an overwhelming generosity. It is the kind of love, which a family has who, united in mutual love, take an orphan into their home. They do not do so out of a need but in the pure spontaneity of their triumphant love.

Nevertheless, in the weeks that follow, the family, once complete in itself, comes to need the newcomer. Without him the circle is now incomplete; his absence now causes anxiety; his waywardness brings concern; his goodness and happiness are necessary to those who have come to love him: upon his response depends the triumph or tragedy of the family's love. In spontaneous love, the family has surrendered its own fulfillment and placed it precariously in the orphan's hands. Love has surrendered its triumphant self-sufficiency and created its own need. This is the supreme illustration of love's self-giving or self-emptying, that it should surrender its fullness and create in itself the emptiness of need.

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The ultimate wisdom and understanding we can learn is to know that the love of God is free, overflowing, and abundant. To understand the wisdom of the Holy Trinity is to know that God's love overflows into creation and invites us to encounter the divine relationship of love so that we too may overflow with life and love. Amen.