

## 6 The Eucharist and the Trinity

IN THE PAST twenty years [c. 1975–1995], ‘non-realist’ views of God have captured the imaginations of many Christians. These views believe that there is no transcendent Other ‘out there’ to whom we can pray but that God-language is a way of talking of the transcendence of the human project. Others, who do believe in a transcendent Other, believe that this Other is the origin of all things, the mystery of the world, but does not intervene actively in the course of human history. Theologically, arguments for the latter view are weighty and impressive. If God can act but does nothing to stop acts of appalling human wickedness, for example, then what kind of being are we dealing with?

I cannot speak for all those who continue to believe in a transcendent Other who acts within history, but can only record my own reasons for doing so. The first is a sense of presence which will not go away no matter how sceptical I try to become. The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas has above all made this sense his own. Some of his poems speak of ‘presence’ and some of ‘absence’ but it comes to the same thing. Here is his great poem ‘The Presence’:

I pray and incur  
silence. Some take that silence  
for refusal.

                  I feel the power  
that, invisible, catches me  
by the sleeve, nudging  
                  towards the long shelf  
that has the book on it I will take down  
                  and read and find the antidote to an ailment.  
                  I know its ways with me;  
how it enters my life,  
                  is present rather  
before I perceive it, sunlight quivering on a bare wall.  
                  Is it consciousness trying  
to get through?  
                  Am I under  
regard?  
                  It takes me seconds  
to focus, by which time  
                  it has shifted its gaze,  
looking a little to one  
                  side, as though I were not here.

It has the universe  
                  to be abroad in.  
There is nothing I can do

but fill myself with my own  
silence, hoping it will approach  
like a wild creature to drink  
there, or perhaps like Narcissus  
to linger a moment over its transparent face.<sup>1</sup>

I can speak of my second reason for continuing to believe in the God who is Other than this creation only in terms of what the Reformers called the 'self-evidence' of Scripture. I do not speak of every word and chapter. There is plenty of material which has been and continues to be damaging, especially in the underwriting of patriarchy. However, in large parts of Scripture I find myself met by a voice which speaks to the essential concerns of the world in which I live, and which still generates prophetic witness and human hope.

In both these cases it is not a question of reflecting on the world and concluding that without God it does not make sense, but rather an experience of being met, confronted, questioned, challenged, sometimes inspired. I do, however, also find the resolute atheist view more incredible than any theism. Bertrand Russell's view was that we are evolutionary accidents crawling about on a cooling cinder. Every precious relationship and every experience, whether of joy, beauty or tragedy, cries out against this.

And so I continue to pray to, or within the movement of, the God I believe is revealed to us in Scripture, the Triune God. It is this God who is celebrated, as the mystery of the world, in the eucharist.

Many Christians feel baffled by the Trinity, and approach it as if it were some mathematical conundrum only to be solved by the Great Logician at the end of time. As a choirboy I remember vividly saying the Athanasian creed at the beginning of each Lent: 'The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Spirit incomprehensible'. And of course we added, 'the whole b—— thing incomprehensible'. When, many years later, I came across Karl Barth's remark that the triunity of God was the secret of God's beauty, and later still discovered, with so many others, 'Celtic spirituality', childhood bafflement had long been replaced by the sense that the concept of the Trinity was the most illuminating of all Christian teachings.

The doctrine, or as David Jenkins prefers to insist, the 'symbol', arose as a response to Christian experience. Jesus, Paul and all the rest worshipped the God of Israel. Paul, like all the authors of the New Testament, believed that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that this event, profoundly mysterious as it was, threw quite new light on the rabbi of Nazareth. It led Christians to bestow on him, in Paul's words, 'the name above every name'. At the same time, God was encountered within the community's life in a way for which the old word 'Spirit' had to be used. What led to the theological exploration of the first four centuries of Christianity which produced the doctrine was not a love for metaphysical quiddities but the attempt to fathom what had to be said

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'The Presence' in *Later Poems* (Macmillan, 1984)

about 'God' if the New Testament were taken seriously as revelation, and if Christian experience were to be understood. Of this exploration, *par excellence*, it is true that *lex orandi lex credendi est* – the shape of our praying determines the shape of what we believe. In this process the eucharist played a decisive role.

Already by the time of Hippolytus, at the turn of the third century, the structure of the thanksgiving prayer is clearly Trinitarian, as it remains to this day. There are two basic rules of Trinitarian grammar. The first is that 'The works of God outside Godself are undivided.' The second is that we may 'appropriate' different aspects of God's work to each of the three persons. So the first part of the eucharistic prayer offers thanks for the blessings of creation (the 'appropriation' of God the Father); the second for the redemption accomplished in Jesus (the 'appropriation' of God the Son); whilst the final part invokes the Holy Spirit, and prays that she may descend on the Church (sanctification as the 'appropriation' of the Spirit). The centrality of creation is implicit in the use of material elements like bread and wine; of redemption in the recalling of Christ's interpretation of his own death; of sanctification in the meeting of the Church as the seedbed of the new humanity. The eucharist, which was from the beginning the 'normal' form of worship in the Church (i.e. in the strict sense of being the norm for authentic worship) thus inevitably led to that exploration which we call Trinitarian doctrine.

It is surely no coincidence that when the eucharist became only occasional in many Protestant churches after the Reformation the doctrine of the Trinity quickly came to seem remote and alien, and was written off as a piece of theological sophistry, the most irrelevant of all doctrines to real life, as Kant called it. The exploration was deprived of its roots in the Church's worship and so withered. Where it was preserved it was often with a spirit of the shrug of the shoulders: of course, it's all too difficult for human minds, and much too complex for simple Christians, but we accept it in faith. Conversely there may well be a real connection between the liturgical renewal of the present century and the rebirth of interest in Trinitarian theology of which we are currently the astonished witnesses. This connection may be indicated in at least four fundamental ways.

One of the functions of the symbol of the Trinity is to enable the affirmation that God is involved in history, that God has a history, and that God's history interweaves with ours. This affirmation is opposed to the deist idea of God, who exists but does not want to get involved, or the Neo-Platonist God who cannot engage with created reality.

The perception that God's being is itself a history begins from the attempt to take the involvement of God in the cross of Jesus seriously. 'Anyone who really talks of the Trinity talks of the cross of Jesus, and does not speculate in heavenly riddles.'<sup>2</sup> On the cross God suffers and dies. That assertion is at the heart of our faith, and for Christians at the heart of the rationality and justifiability of our world – which is

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<sup>2</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (SCM, 1974), page 207

otherwise threatened by the meaninglessness of wickedness, pain and death. The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is 'there' on the cross, but that God also remains the Father to whom Jesus prayed and who suffers the death of the Son. It says further that God's continuing redemptive presence springs from and is related in the closest way to this event. The Spirit is identified as the Spirit of the crucified. But in that case to use the word 'God' is not to speak of a remote First Cause, but to recognize history, passion and suffering *within God*. God is who God is in God's history, and God's history includes the cross and by that token all crosses. This recognition has led to the description of God's life as act or event. Prayer, therefore, is not prayer 'to' God but prayer within a history, an entering into or being caught up in an event. Christian prayer is summed up in the words of the eucharistic offertory round:

To the Father, through the Son  
Offer we this bread and wine  
Which, through the Spirit blest,  
Becomes love's sign.

Christian prayer is Trinitarian prayer not in being prayer to a 'three-headed God' but in being prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. The model of all such prayer is the eucharist. It is thanksgiving to the Father of all things made possible through the self-offering of the Son, and offered in the fellowship of the Spirit in the Church. The eucharist is, then, the school of our praying, leading to prayer which is properly Trinitarian and therefore properly Christian, a fact which is imaged with tremendous power by Rublyev's great icon of the Trinity. Here the three Persons sit at the eucharistic table, the bread and wine before them, the table open to all, to the whole tumult of human history and to all of creation. The artist interprets the Trinity through the wonderful story of the heavenly visitors in Genesis 18. As in Jesus' practice, hospitality – table fellowship – is the site of encounter with God and of blessing. In the background is the oak of Mamre, which is also the tree of the cross – creation and redemption together – the history of Abraham and Sarah standing at the beginning of the narrative of which we too are a part. The three Persons each have their pilgrim staves in their hand. God, says Rublyev, is a journeying God, accompanying human beings on the long road to freedom. On that road God invites us to table, for refreshment for the journey, and that invitation calls us into the prayer which is a participation, a sharing, in the divine relations, in the dance or the journey of God.

It is again partly neglect of this school of prayer which has led to the dichotomy between an abstract deism on the one hand, which prays only to 'Almighty God' and knows nothing of the Son, and an equally abstract pietism on the other which prays only to 'Lord Jesus' to the exclusion of the Father. Since the eighteenth century, Protestantism has balanced uneasily between these alternatives. It is a healthy sign that as we begin to come to terms with and recognize the limitations of the Enlightenment we are able once again to recover a Trinitarian form of prayer.

'God is love': the most fundamental Christian assertion. Augustine's *De Trinitate* is an exploration of this statement. His conclusion is that if you are going to maintain it seriously you must talk about relationship at the heart of reality. The symbol of the

Trinity says first that the direction in creation which is deepest and most significant, truly 'ultimate', is glimpsed imperfectly in persons. Persons however do not exist outside relationship. We are as we are in relation. When we say 'person' we do not mean 'individual' but 'being-in-relation', and it is in the conviction that here we have the clue to the ultimate nature of reality that we say that 'God is personal' or speak of 'One God in three persons'. 'In the beginning is the relation' (Martin Buber). This is what is maintained by the Trinitarian symbol. The function of the symbol is to say that we cannot go deeper, beyond or behind this, in the direction of any kind of monism in which 'God' finally absorbs all relation. This Nirvanic vision would deny to persons the ultimate value which we believe to be affirmed in the incarnation.

Some anthropologists have argued, and it seems highly plausible, that our contemporary understanding of 'person' owes a great deal to the doctrines of incarnation and Trinity, this despite the fact that theologians have hedged the term 'person' in Trinitarian discourse with all sorts of caveats. Most would nevertheless agree that the Trinitarian symbol 'declares that it is proper to think of relationships as part of the pattern and dynamic of ultimate reality'.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the symbol does not give us a 'fix' on God so that, in the notorious eighteenth-century phrase, 'Christianity is no longer mysterious.' On the other hand if, as Christian faith affirms, the truth about God is affirmed in this symbol then it is the truth of our world which is affirmed as well. What we are told, and what we signify in the eucharist, is that in truly equal and loving relationships we are corresponding, bringing ourselves into line with, the very heart of reality.

As already noted, the various rules of Trinitarian discourse were ways of exploring the statement 'God is love'. The most prominent of these was that the Three are One, and the One is Three. The way in which the Cappadocian Fathers, contemporaries of Augustine, tried to elucidate this has recently been much pursued. They talked of a 'mutual indwelling' of the three persons – imaged in medieval art by three overlapping circles. Our contemporary understanding of the way in which relationships work perhaps helps us to understand this. David Jenkins has put it teasingly by saying that what the doctrine of the Trinity promises us is that 'There is a way of my being me which will come about by my finding my being in you. And this will come about when and as you are you and I am I.'<sup>4</sup>

We can unpack this through the recognition of the way in which we all impinge on others. In most relationships there is some sort of power game going on. I am who I am at the expense of my friend, husband, child being fully themselves. The doctrine of the Trinity, however, thinks of fulfilled relationships in which it is precisely who we are which makes the other most fully themselves. So the Son is who 'he' is because the Father is who 'he' is, and both are what they are because the Spirit is what 'she' is.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity* (SCM, 1976), page 155

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity*, page 158

The eucharist points towards this reality, holds it before us, to make sure we do not forget it. It is called 'communion' because it is the sacrament of shared relationships. The emphasis is not solely on the 'vertical' communion of the soul with God because both Jesus and writers like the author of 1 John insist that that relationship is impossible without the relationship to my neighbour. 'Communion' is image of God sharing with image of God at my side, realizing the image of God who is community in Godself. The God who is in relation is worshipped through the establishment of more whole and more human relationships in a community without edges whose task is to infect the whole world with the vision of the ultimacy of this pattern of relation. In the kingdom, which for Paul was anticipated in the *ecclesia* ('we have the first fruits ...') and where the eucharist was a prophetic sign, there could be no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female, no slave nor free but only relations in hope, joy and equality, and ultimately 'in' God. 'It is neither fantastically visionary nor beyond all reason', says David Jenkins, 'to take the risk and the hope of commitment to a vision which speaks of a community and a communion where love fulfils love so that everyone is fully human because everyone is fully human.'<sup>5</sup> The symbol of the Trinity sets us free to hope this, to take love absolutely seriously. Of this hope and love the eucharist is the sacramental sign. In the end is the relation. This is what is proclaimed in the bread-breaking.

A third significance of the doctrine relates to the idea of power. Christianity was born in a world where kings had absolute power, where life and death hung on the nod of their head. Within three centuries the rulers of quite a large part of the world were Christian and the temptation was inevitable to understand God, the world ruler, on their model. We see the embarrassment with the Trinity in the iconography of the high Middle Ages. Sometimes we see the picture of Jesus on the cross, supported behind by God the Father, with a dove somewhere in the picture. Alternatively there is picture of the Father seated on the throne with the Son on his lap, again with a dove somewhere. Only in Rublyev's great fifteenth-century icon do we have a picture of three equal Persons, their pilgrim staves in their hand, gathered round the eucharistic table, with the tree of the cross in the background.

The medieval images are hierarchical but, as the Christian socialists of the last [nineteenth] century liked to say, quoting the Athanasian creed, the doctrine of the Trinity speaks of a God 'in whom there is none afore and none after, but one perfect equality'. Politically the image of the Trinity speaks of shared power and the will to share power. It was an image, then, of an abolition of hierarchy in favour of a situation where all were prophets, all filled with the Spirit of God in relation.

As the sacrament which arose from the worship of the Trinitarian God, and whose structure mirrored this threefold relation, the eucharist unconsciously preserved an alternative vision of society. Though it was co-opted by a hierarchical Church, with bishops, priests, deacons and laity in an order of strict submission and obedience, it

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<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity*, page 145

was the fact that alternatives were represented there which made it such a contentious issue at the Reformation. The 'logic' of the divine love, of which the eucharist is the sign-act, is against all exercise of power from above down, against all sectional uses of power, and constructive of the power of love's solidarity. Because the eucharist is 'love's sign', the sign of that being in relation where love fulfils love, it is the signifying of what society must become and how power must be exercised if it is to come into line with reality, if it is not to be grievously warped and twisted by attempting to go against the grain of the universe as discerned in the crucified Lord.

One of the problems of attributing so much to, or as some may want to say 'reading so much into', the eucharist is that it contradicts our experience of the very ordinary, moderately friendly but also often frankly rather dull services we know Sunday by Sunday. No doubt much of this dullness can be put down to poor preaching and sloppy preparation for the liturgy. On the other hand it is also true that it is, much of the time, much more comfortable to retreat from the depths than to brave them. Our experience constantly confirms the great theme of Eliot's poetry that 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' On the other hand the superficial also cloys, even if we long to return to its slavery. Flight from reality and hunger for reality, desire for the bread which perishes and for the true bread, jostle together in our lives and form their pattern.

If we suggest, as Eliot does in the *Four Quartets*, that the function of the eucharist is to bring us into touch with reality we need to be careful to use this word in a sufficiently nuanced way. It is true that 'reality' is the death of children from poverty and disease, and torture of the innocent to defend the interests of Mammon. On this line 'reality' is Auschwitz and we condemn ourselves to triviality if we do not face this. It is equally true, however, both that we cannot bear this reality and also that there is very much more to reality than this. The 'trivial' has its own importance. It is interesting how Jesus' parables return above all to household tasks – sweeping a room, mending an old garment, a thrifty housewife trying to make wineskins last one more year, baking bread, putting out the oil lamps at night, and so on. Jesus did not come preaching a hothouse gospel of the existential depths but mischievously speaks of the depths through and in terms of the trivial and ordinary. The importance he gave to the business of eating is a case in point, and there is surely something of the divine humour in the fact that the sacrament we have been given of the mystery of God's love is a sharing of homœopathic portions of bread and wine!

The eucharist therefore has both aspects of reality. In commemorating a death through torture it brings the tortured to mind. In celebrating the sharing of bread it recalls those who have no bread to share. In being a communion of equals it reminds us of the inequality of most of our brothers and sisters. It reflects on the real world. Its concern is that God's kingdom come and be done 'on earth'.

On the other hand the gospel is not about the importance of being earnest. 'Too much humility is a bore', wrote Bonhoeffer, and so is the idea that 'reality' can be exclusively defined in terms of those extraordinary moments of passion, suffering and insight which intervene here and there in our lives. 'Reality' is both. The Jesus who

went to the cross was also the Jesus who laughed and joked with his disciples, who was ironical with his enemies, and who enjoyed playing with children. Jesus was the normal human being only as the one who learned his humanity from the laughter of Sarah, the amorousness of Ruth, the fatherly passion of David, the common sense of the wise, and the eroticism of the Song of Songs.

The flight from reality which constitutes so much of our experience is at the same time a flight from the mystery of who we ourselves are, who our neighbour is, and why and what the world is. The video culture and cable TV is but the latest and most sophisticated attempt to make this denial of the mystery systematic. The fundamental form of the mystery in our experience is our fellow human being. Sooner or later comes the disconcerting realization that the more deeply we know parent, husband, wife or child the less we know them. If we say that 'God' is a mystery this is not because theological algebra is baffling but because God is 'the most personal being', the root of personhood, that reality which persons have to grow into. The Trinity is a mystery because and as it speaks about what relations and persons really are. The eucharist is the sacrament of that mystery. Here we may legitimately speak of an exploration of 'the holy mysteries', which are ultimately relationships.

'God became human', said Luther, 'so that from proud and inhuman gods he might make real human beings.' The eucharist is given to be part of this process; in it we rehearse the question of what it means to become human. We rehearse the mystery of which Jesus, as human being, as being in relation to Martha, Mary, Peter, Judas – is the sign. Because at its ultimate depth the mystery is relation, the sign is naturally 'communion', sharing. It is education for growth, for changing and changing often. It is an invitation to exploration, to perceiving and realizing the mystery which awaits us at every turn of mystery's creation. It is the sacrament of the beauty, depth and mystery of the trivial and ordinary. It is the foretaste and celebration of the resurrection of the flesh.