

*Sermon Easter V 2008: Imitations of the Trinity*

As we settled in the plane going on holiday the other week, I read the sort of front page newspaper article that makes you glad you're leaving the country. It was about the wholesale collapse of the social network – and I don't mean *Facebook* and the childish *Look at me* advertisements that so called grown up people put there. No, I read about the abolition of local post offices, the closing of village pubs, the bankrupting of corner shops and the spread of out-of-town superstores; and the replacement of the family doctor's practice by something remote and bureaucratic called *Treatment Centres*. I've long noticed how anything called *The Centre* is always on the outskirts. Naturally, all this set me thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity.

For when the Bible teaches that we are made in the image of God, this is not just a colourful figure of speech: it is something very definite - because the character of God is something very definite. From the time of St Matthews's Gospel, we have been taught to worship God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. This is a profound and limitless vision, productive of all Christian theology. At the centre of this vision is ceaseless activity. God is not static. He does things. The Father creates. The Son redeems. The Holy Ghost sanctifies. This is to say that God made us. When we went wrong he made us right. And every moment he sustains us by his Spirit. Three Persons in One God is therefore the origin of our being, our moral character and our eternal life with him.

So this is the image of God in which we are made. This means that we are meant to be and act like the Holy Trinity. We too are to create, to mend things when they break and to sustain, sanctify and make good all the people, things and tasks that are given to us. Let us look at just some of these things as they occur in our everyday lives.

St Augustine says that the Holy Trinity is *love and nothing else*. This means that God does not look out for himself, he does not seek his own gratification. He pours out his limitless being endlessly for us: creating us, redeeming us and sustaining us. We are called to do the same. Our being and activity must be an imitation of God's being and activity. Like God, we are not meant to concentrate on ourselves. God is not a transcendental egoist. We must not be ruled by our ego, by our self-preoccupation, either. If there were time to give only one piece of spiritual guidance, one would want to say: *Don't make yourself the centre of your universe. For God's sake, think about something else*. We have been told: *If you seek to save your life, you will lose it*

For example, the farmer will seek the long-term viability of his land. He will therefore not exploit it for short-term profit that leads to exhaustion in the long run. And he probably will not try to make a fast buck out of biofuels when the world's poor are running short of cereals: though perhaps the commissar for global warming will allow him little choice

There aren't many farmers in the City of London, but there are plenty of liverymen. They should enjoy their dinners as part of the good creation which God means us to enjoy. But the liveryman's vocation is not to eat, drink and be merry and then assuage his patrician guilt by rushing off to perform acts of charity which are not true charity – usually some futile gesture in the East End or the psychotic ambition to *save Africa*; still less to fall into an obsession about his *carbon footprint*. No, the vocation of the

liveryman, by which he imitates God the Holy Trinity, is to preserve the integrity of his livery company; that is to ensure the historical connection between its past and present into its future.

There are financiers in the City too, I've noticed. They have a vocation and it is to avoid selling loans to people who can't afford them. Because too many financiers worldwide have not followed this sound policy, we are now suffering the credit crunch and perhaps heading for an economic slump. Because too many financiers have been foolish and greedy, we have what is called a *crisis of confidence*. The religious word, the biblical word, the church's word, for *confidence* is *faith*. This is what we are now experiencing, a crisis of faith which is a version of hell on earth: the opposite of *love thy neighbour*; namely *screw thy neighbour*.

Likewise the politician who aspires to be a statesman, to do good for his people and nation, should have his thoughts on the next generation, not just the next election

The writer and the musical composer is not to fill notebooks and reams of manuscript paper with the aim of *expressing himself*. It is not something precious and internal to the personality of the writer and musician that counts for anything. Those things are mostly illusory anyhow. It is not the darling little personality, the supposed interiority, of the writer and composer that counts, but his sustained concentration on the words or the music. Bach took his sense of purpose from God. We could all do with taking our sense of purpose – what we're here for – from Bach who said that everything he did was to the glory of God. When Bach spoke of *the glory of God* it was not sentimental; it was no mere rhetorical flourish. He meant it.

Parents are very much in the image of God. They are given the privilege of creating, redeeming and sustaining their children – just as God creates, redeems and sustains us. So, like God, we bring forth children, we teach them right and wrong, rebuking them and restraining them when they go wrong and giving them the sorts of physical, intellectual and spiritual diet that can truly nourish them. The parent is therefore denying his God-given task, defacing the image of God within him, when he neglects to nurture his children, when he lets his children do as they like; when he does not teach them to discriminate between what can really nourish them and what is trashy and destructive. Of course this is a long story for, such has been our falling off from former excellences, that much of the present generation of parents no longer knows the difference between right and wrong, quality and rubbish. By their fruits ye shall know them and the evidence is all around us.

The priest does not get off any more lightly. The priest has his own vocation and it is to be true to his original calling. Often we are tempted – I speak for myself here too – to dilute and cheapen that original calling to make ourselves popular. This popularity cult – like the personality cult among writers, artists and musicians – destroys the purpose of the priesthood. When the priest abandons the liturgy which he promised to use when he was first ordained, he is not a true priest but an apostate, a traitor.

Likewise, he is a faithless priest when he lacks the courage and diligence to apply himself to the doctrines of the faith and instead treats these doctrines as if they were mere metaphors for something else, something that goes down better, parts of some social or political manifesto. For example the priest as preacher who denies the resurrection of Our Lord and re-invents it in soppy phrases such as *The disciples*

*experienced a new quality of life.* Or the priest-sermoniser who teaches his people that the feeding of the five thousand was no miracle but just an example of *sharing*. When the priest gives up being true in order to be popular, he loses the truth and then he finds he is not even popular but rather despised.

Perhaps you have noticed that all the things which the farmer, the financier, the liveryman, the musician, the parent and the priest shouldn't do, yet have an appearance of what they should do. Hypocrites are expert at making self-promotion look like disinterested kindness; writers and artists at making gaudy self-advertisement seem to be genuine works of art; sentimental parents, shirking the task of child-rearing, are well able to make indulgence look like tenderness; the priest, having given up as too hard the proclamation of Word and Sacraments in all their glorious fullness, can so easily seem to be doing his Christian duty when he's only a *nice man* schmoozing important people for personal advantage.

Yes, vice does, on the face of it, look extraordinarily like virtue. This is what the great theologians meant when they described the Devil as *the Ape of God*. We are called not into such monkey business but into true imitation of the work of the Trinity. The Trinity, remember, is love and nothing else. Love is simply what is real. We are to be and do those things which imprint the image of the Trinity on the world everyday. We shall fall short of course. But when we truly try, God will make up our shortfall. Try to be like God.

*Ours is only the trying: the rest is not our business.*