

*Sermon, Trinity Sunday 2008.*

*Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith; which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.*

It's not fashionable these days to insist that your everlasting fate depends on precisely what you believe. How unfair! How obscure! How primitive! How medieval! The creed of the modern world is: *Everyone has a right to their own opinion.* And of course this is extended to mean that everyone's opinion, however uninformed, however stupid, is as good as anyone else's. And this is what we find in religious education. The teacher addresses the twelve year old: *St Paul believed this. St Augustine believed that. St Thomas Aquinas believed as follows – what do you believe Megan?*

But there it's plain, near the beginning of the Prayer Book, in *The Athanasian Creed*, we must believe in the Trinity. Our eternal salvation depends on it.

But what can it mean? *The Book of Revelation* doesn't know and, as this morning's Epistle showed, it resorts to wild imagery: talking trumpets, a sea of glass, four beasts with six wings apiece and so on. In the Gospel, Nicodemus, the wisest Pharisee in Israel, doesn't know either. And Jesus doesn't even try to tell him. There's a charming scene in Alan Bennett's play *Forty Years On* in which the old-fashioned housemaster is preparing a boy for Confirmation. The boy asks, *But what about The Trinity, Sir?* And the Master replies, *Oh don't worry your head. Three in one and one in three and all that: go and see your maths master!*

The modern world is all on the side of Alan Bennett's housemaster - that the Trinity is too obscure to worry about. Why not just get on with being a nice down-to-earth Christian instead? In fact the modern world has no time for doctrine or dogma and prefers for its religion, if it has any, to be a touchy-feely approach, a general sense of niceness. But the truth is that you cannot have right action without right thinking. It's common sense and it operates in every other area of human life you can think of.

You need to think straight. Take last year's space-probe to Mars. If they'd fired it one centimetre off the correct trajectory, it would eventually miss the red planet by thousands of miles. Or, nearer home, B-flat is very close to B-natural, but if half of us sang B-flat when we should be singing B-natural like the rest – imagine the cacophony.

The truth is that Christianity is not a vague thing: it is intellectually coherent. At the centre of our faith is a precise teaching about God. And this is the doctrine of the Trinity. And what we believe about God has eternal consequences for us. Belief in the Trinity has consequences for us in the world of everyday too. I shall come back to this in a minute, but first how do we know that the doctrine of the Trinity is true? Where did it come from? The answer is that it is revealed to us and this revelation is confirmed by our experience.

But revelation is not a bolt from the blue. It's not a Hollywood movie with Charlton Heston doing the voice of God. Revelation is what gradually dawns on the saint after giving his life to the contemplation of God. And revelation is not always immediately clear. There is first an experience of a certain sort and only later, after profound reflection, the meaning of the experience emerges: it is the processing of what is mystical by the intelligence.

So an early evocation of the Trinity is God in the persons of three men who turn up outside Abraham's tent. But Abraham didn't formulate the doctrine of the Trinity as a result. Only the experience was there, given, and the interpretation came later. Similarly, when the Gospel of St Matthew ends with Our Lord telling his disciples to go into all the world preaching and baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, we must not imagine that those first disciples had the developed understanding of the Trinity which we find later in, say, St Augustine.

Christian doctrine arises out of the pressure of thought, contemplation. It is the sort of thought which the poet goes in for or even the musical composer. It is like digging or struggling to find your way in the dark. You only have the dimmest awareness of where you're trying to get. But when you get there, there is no doubt you're in the right place. Don't think that something which the poet or the composer creates is not real. Divinely-inspired human creativity makes things, real things.

And as the poet creates a real sonnet and the composer a real symphony, so the Christian philosopher creates a real doctrinal truth. The dawning of this truth – the realisation that it is a truth – is what we allude to when we say it is inspired and revealed. The Christian philosopher didn't know it already. As C.H. Sisson said, *No use filling books with what you know already.*

The poet doesn't just write down his poem out of his head, like an explanation or a note for the milkman. Rather he enters a certain state of mind, call it a poetic state, and a few words come to him in a rhythm. He gropes for the next line, and for the next until the poem is finished. The act of musical composition is the same. Creation is work, groaning and travailing. In the same way the Christian philosopher walks half-seeing into the dark and God meets him halfway with the gift of the truth.

Now let me try to show why believing the Trinity is not just crucial for our everlasting destiny but why it has the most practical consequences for life in the here and now. Foolish and unthinking people place Christianity in opposition to science. Actually, Christianity and science belong together. Modern science developed out of classical Christian doctrines and particularly out of the doctrine of the Trinity. And consider this: science did not develop in any other culture, religion or civilisation in history. Only in Christianity.

This is how it happened. The first great age of rationality was that of the ancient Greeks. They were so brilliant in so many ways: in philosophy, sculpture and the drama they excelled. So ask yourself – why did such an intelligent and developed culture never get round to inventing science in the modern sense? Partly, this was because they had no sense of the oneness of the natural world. Consequently, each aspect of the natural world was perceived differently. This was symbolised by the many Greek gods. The Greek philosophers never imagined that these gods actually

lived up there on Mount Olympus. Rather the various gods symbolised and represented the different aspects of the natural world. And the Greeks couldn't make the one-ness of the world that is necessary for the invention of science.

This is the difference between the Greeks and Christian philosophy. As R.G. Collingwood put it: *It is an axiom for us that in any realm of nature there are certain laws which hold good not only there but in all other natural realms without exception.* Christianity abolished the many pagan gods and, by claiming that there is only one true God, laid the philosophical basis for a universal science – that is science in the modern sense.

In other words, Christian philosophers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century corrected the philosophical error which finally killed of classical civilisation. And this correction was the doctrine of the Trinity. By believing in God the Father, they believed that the world is one. By believing in the Son, they meant that the one world is also a multiplicity of natural realms. By believing in the Holy Ghost, they meant that the world is a world not just of things but of movement.

This is the meaning of *The Athanasian Creed*:

*Whosoever will be saved it is necessary above all things that he believe the Catholic Faith. And the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.*

It is necessary, said the Fathers, that you believe this if you will be saved. And this means not only the salvation of your soul through all eternity, but the salvation of your sanity and your intellectual integrity in the here and now. This is not fanciful. It is the philosophical basis which makes modern science possible and which, by implication, governs all the ordinary practicalities and benefits of living in a modern scientific age.

Our whole life here and hereafter is lived in the truth of the Holy Trinity, the life of God as he is in himself.